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Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 15:02:22

CLONE COMMANDER GRADUATES READY FOR ACTION

TIPOCA CITY, KAMINO - The first graduates of an advanced officer-training program for the Grand Army of the Republic are ready for action.

Not all clones are created equal. Although they share the same genetic template, a classified percentage of the Republic's clone troopers are designated commanders at the embryonic stage. They undergo a specially tailored flash education program and subtle genetic manipulation to emerge with the necessary command expertise on their very first missions.

Supplementing these virtual educational packages are grueling training programs administered by members of the elite Advanced Recon Commandos, the ARC troopers - even more specialized clones that are developed in smaller numbers. From the first class of clone commanders have emerged 100 graduates ready for distribution to the scattered battlefields of the Clone Wars.

"The canned edu-packs can teach a soldier only so much," said Alpha-17, lead instructor at the Tipoca City training facility. "These commanders need the guidance only seasoned combat veterans can provide."

"There's a galaxy of difference," said Commander Thire 4477, one of the graduates. "Sure, we understand that the neural pumps give us what feel like authentic combat memories, but having the ARC drill sergeants making it real and overseeing the simulations gives us the edge over the previous units."

One notable distinction of the ARC commanders is their use of given names in addition to serial numbers. Upon graduation, these clone commanders are officially recognized by this identification.

"In the past, a desire for individuality led to the spontaneous creation of combat nicknames in the field," explains Kaminoan Prime Minister Lama Su. "A name was once considered a flaw, but we have found that allowing names

produces the desired effects of initiative and goal-setting. In command units, these unofficial nicknames are formally recognized as a mark of distinction and excellence among our most capable products."

Many of these command graduates will be stationed on worlds of the Corellian Trade Spine to counter recent Separatist advances along that hyperspace corridor.

NEW TAGGE BARON LEADS TECH INITIATIVE

UNLOS TAGGE, TEPASI - With a mandate to bridge the technological gap in the Clone Wars, prodigy Baron Orman Tagge has been named chair of a specialized tech steering committee, part of the Analysis Bureau of Republic Intelligence.

"Too long has the enemy benefited from the research and innovation of the Techno Union," said Armand Isard, director of the Senate Bureau of Intelligence, via holocomm. "We have assembled the brightest minds loyal to the Republic cause and will counter anything the Separatists have to offer."

The appointment marks the second advancement for Orman Tagge, a technical mastermind just 17 standard years of age who was granted the title of baron last month.

"The bold ideas of the House of Tagge have kept us leaders for generations," said Tagge. "I vow to put aside any past competitive differences we may have had with other firms that are still loyal to the Republic, and I extend an invitation to the best engineers and scientists from Sienar, Kuat, Rendili and Corellian Engineering to counter the growing threat."

CIS Shadowfeed

Dispatch 15:2:29 Edition

BREAKING NEWS: Confederacy Storms Duro

JYVUS SPACE CITY, DURO - At 0221 local time, Operation Durge's Lance broke through the outer system defenses of Duro, destroying four Golan Arms deep-space battle platforms and devastating three Acclamator-class assault ships - Anvil, Coronet and Bolide - and two Dreadnaught heavy cruisers -- Prominence and Atrisian Iron.

One of Duro's largest spaceborne cities, Jyvus, has already surrendered to Confederacy forces. Battle-droid infantry and Neimoidian irregulars have secured the structure and transformed it into a field command station for the Office of the General. Duro Chief Representative Officer Hoolidan Keggle, a native of Jyvus, is currently missing. Intelligence reports speculate that Keggle has fled the orbital archipelago for the surface of the planet.

Though victory is far from secure with at least four more Acclamators, a Victory-class Destroyer and another Dreadnaught still in the system, the assault on Duro marks yet another major world along the Corellian Trade Spine targeted by Operation Durge's Lance.

Consisting of the First and Third fleets of the Confederacy Navy, the task force originally launched from Yag'Dhul and has been provisioned by supply lines from Sullust and Thyferra.

A team of Givin and droid astrogators have calculated modified hyper-space routes that circumvented Republic attempts to mine the Corellian Trade Spine. Seismic EMP countermines deployed by Techno Union picket ships have cleared a corridor into Duro, precipitating the attack.

The Duro planetary-defense forces, supplemented by at least one squadron of Jedi starfighters and two wings of V-19 starfighters, have been dispatched against the Confederacy forces, but preliminary reports indicate that the tri-droid fighters and vulture starfighters have broken through the Republic's snubfighter screens.

Though it is still early in the engagement, it is believed that Confederacy forces are currently positioning to cut off any Republic reinforcements from Kuat or Nubia. With such an overwhelming assault, CIS Shadowfeed analysts predict the fall of Duro by the end of this standard week.

If Operation Durge's Lance continues to push Coreward, Corellia will be the next world targeted. Fighting along the Corellian Trade Spine has intensified to rival the long engagements of the Rimma Trade Route and the Seswenna front.

CIS Shadowfeed will continue round-the-chrono coverage of this developing story.

Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 15:3:02

DURO FALLS TO GRIEVOUS

CONFEDERACY NOW CONTROLS VITAL SYSTEM

Duro Capitulates After Week-Long Fighting

Coruscant System Borders Bolstered

Onaconda Farr Steps Down From Action Committee

BORIBUS, CORUSCANT - With stunned silence, Republic viewers in the Duros Cultural Center in the Boribos Prefecture of Coruscant watched holographic footage broadcast from the besieged world of Duro confirming their worst fears - one of the founding worlds of the Republic has fallen to the Separatist Supreme Commander, General Grievous.

Dramatic images live from Duro's surface showed the Republic seal in flames, and new flags bearing the hexagonal Confederacy emblem decorating the entrance to the Valley of Royalty.

"So, the Republic would have the galaxy believe that its heart is secure," said Grievous in a Confederacy HoloNet transmission released by the Senate Bureau of Intelligence earlier today. "Today's events, however, show that there is nothing that can stop our forces from total victory."

SBI holography analysts confirmed that the imagery and transmissions were genuine and unaltered. Other transmissions released today corroborated earlier reports detailing the fall of Duro.

Following the destruction of the Acclamator-class warships Founder, Annealer and Doughty, the last of the Republic capital ships withdrew to the outer system. Having taken over Jyvus Space City, one of the largest orbital centers over Duro, the Confederacy was able to drop the planetary shields protecting the world. From staging points on Jyvus, Separatist drop-fighters began orbital bombardment of the planetside industrial factories surrounding the valley.

The hermetic environments were ruptured and exposed to the toxic chemicals unleashed by the bombardment, allowing the droid forces of the Confederacy to easily claim the world's surface capitals. Holographic imagery shows General Grievous forcing a haggard-looking Dura Chief Representative Officer Hoolidan Keggle to sign his capitulation to the Separatists.

"The taking of the ground was just a final insult from the General," said SBI Director-General Armand Isard. "The Separatists had Duro the second they claimed Jyvus."

Isard fielded questions from reporters today at a media conference outside the Senate Rotunda. "While I can assure citizens of Coruscant that we are safe, we want to continue stressing vigilance and preparedness. Winning this war will require discomforts and sacrifice, but together we will persevere," he said.

Isard refused specific comment on the conduct of the Republic naval forces, particularly the lack of resupply from nearby Nubia. The sluggish response of Republic reinforcements is currently under investigation, and Senator Onaconda Farr (Rodia), who had been in charge of the

Senate Action Subcommittee for Corellian Trade Spine Defense, has resigned his position (see article 194.11).

Rotunda insiders speculate that this action could prompt Supreme Chancellor Palpatine to do away with the various specialized "action subcommittees" in the Senate in favor of a stronger, centralized war office.

The Office of the Chancellor has given Admiral Terrinald Screed complete authority in the deployment of Coruscant Planetary Defense resources. Isard assured the media that such actions are not based on any intelligence reports indicating a strike against Coruscant, but rather were "prudent precautionary measures."

The Office of the Supreme Chancellor was not available for comment.

CORELLIANS FEAR IMPENDING ATTACK

CORELLIAN NODE -With Duro a short distance down the Corellian Trade Spine, many Corellians are now bracing themselves for an impending attack from the Confederacy. CorSec forces have been at maximum alert throughout the

sector, particularly in the protection of the Corellian Engineering Corporation shipyards.

Since before the outbreak of hostilities in the Clone Wars, Corellia has taken a limited role in fighting the Separatist forces, producing warships to quota and helping in the distribution of aid and medical supplies. Analysts predict that since the fighting has come perilously close to Corellian borders, the traditionally isolationist sector will take a more active role in the war.

Despite political unpopularity, Corellia has proven to have many vocal allies in the Senate. "This is not about politics," said Senator Fang Zar (Sern Prime), a trading partner with the Corellian sector and a longtime political ally and personal friend to Senator Garm Bel Iblis. "This is about helping people who may be endangered."

Other Senators have not been so supportive. "Where were Senator Bel Iblis and his forces when we needed them at Duro? He will soon come to realize that there comes a price to sticking your head in the sand," said Senator Orn Free Taa (Ryloth).

SENATE ADMITS BUNGLING OF TRADE SPINE DEFENSE

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - A visibly emotional Senator Onaconda Farr (Rodia) tendered his resignation from the Senate Action Subcommittee for Corellian Trade Spine Defense following the disastrous loss of Duro to Confederacy forces.

"It is with great regret that we were unable to head off the advancement of the blasted Separatists and that Duro had to pay the price. I ask for an opportunity of vengeance, but I will heed the advice of my colleagues to step down. Let me add, though, that I do question the judgment of the SBI and the usefulness of whipping the public into a panic by broadcasting those images [of Duro]."

"Now is not the time for such partisan finger-pointing," vice chair of the Senate Mas Amedda told reporters. "That there was a failure in procedure is without question. We're not looking to expend energies on punishment but rather on determining what went wrong and how to prevent it from happening again. There will come time for retribution when the war is over."

CIS Shadowfeed

Dispatch 15:3:21 Edition

Corellian Trade Spine Secured

MID-RIM NODE - With the splitting of a victorious task force of capital warships for patrol duties along the entire Corellian Trade Spine, General Grievous officially declared Operation Durge's Lance a success.

"We have taken the battle to the Republic's heart and have shown those cowards how far we are willing to go to protect what is ours," the General said in a brief statement distributed to CIS Shadowfeed nodes galaxywide.

"With Duro firmly under Confederacy control, our forces now control the flow of traffic up and down the Trade Spine and can prevent Republic attempts to steal back our worlds," the General continued.

Squadrons of Givin combat engineers have towed asteroid bodies into strategic placements and trajectories along the Spine to hinder hyperspace travel. Safe passage can only be obtained through astrogation calculations in 12th-degree hyperometry and Helrossi-principal octratic equations - methodologies devised by advanced Givin theorists.

Geonosian dreadnaughts and Givin Wavecrest-class frigates are currently patrolling the Spine. HoloNet nodes along the spine have been dismantled, with the bulk of intra-sector communications being handled instead by Banking Clan communication ships.

Though the General made no comment on future campaigns, analysts foresee Yag'Dhul as a likely launching point for major offensives along the Rimma Trade Route, to supplement forces in the Seswenna and Sluissi sectors. Aleen and Atzerri, worlds that have so far remained neutral, are also likely candidates for liberation missions, while the Republic world of Malastare seems likely to become a major battlefield.

The latest infopacket dispatched by the ever-mobile Separatist Union to CIS Shadowfeed contains an unattributed message directed to Republic media channels.

"We have scanned the propaganda from the Republic, which paints us as predators waiting to snatch up neutral worlds like Corellia," it says. 'The right to secede and determine our own fates dictates our missions. These are not raids of cold conquest. Palpatine knows the terms. Let the Confederacy be, and this war will end.'

Organic Forces Arrive

AVISIO, MOORJA - Moorja, a small Mid-Rim world down the Corellian Trade Spine from Yag'Dhul, will be protected by organic infantry from any Republic reprisals, Commerce Guild President Shu Mai said today.

Protecting the vulnerable "back door" to the recent conquest of the Spine was a key item in her speech to Commerce Guild shareholders today, and holographic imagery from the plains of Moorja showed ranks of the so-called "flesh and blood corps" landing on the planet.

"The ion storms of Moorja have prevented the deployment of our standard battle-droid forces, but Neimoidian Gunnery Battalions, Gossam Commandos and Koorivar Fusiliers have consolidated to provide Moorja with cost-effective protective forces," said Mai.

"If you peruse the attached profit-and-loss schema in your folders, you'll see that in this case, the distribution of organic personnel in this combat market has proven to be more affordable than refitting existing capital goods with ionic-damping technologies," Mai continued. 'The availability of agrarian yields to feed our forces clearly shows that this approach makes the most business sense.'

Republic Holonet News

CORE EDITION | 15:3:29

SENATORS FARR AND COOR CENSURED

SBI REPORT BLAMES SENATORS FOR DURO MISMANAGEMENT

CRIMINAL CHARGES EXPECTED SOON

SENATE ROTUNDA, CORUSCANT - Amid cries of criticism and shouts of "traitor!" Senator Ronet Coor (Iseno) tendered his resignation following

reports of criminal mismanagement that resulted in the capture of Duro by Separatist forces.

Early this morning, the Senate Bureau of Intelligence released its 25-datapage report, authored by Agent Inglemenn Barezz. "We were able to get past the gravwelling of those involved and cut through the bureaucracy. We discovered the unfortunate truth that insular politicking led to the fall of Duro," he told reporters at a press conference.

The report analyzed why Duro was so poorly defended against the Separatist attack, finding that the system's orbital defensive platforms had been supplemented only by meager capital-ship support, most of it in the form of carriers and transports of limited effectiveness.

The system had been allocated three of the newly commissioned Venator-class Star Destroyers, all of which were absent during the attack. Fraudulent requisition datamemos placed the three vessels as undergoing "shakedown refurbishment" at a classified location, but the SBI report revealed that they had been instead redistributed to the Rodia-Ando battlefield in the Mid Rim.

The report names Senator Onaconda Farr (Rodia) - then chair of the Senate Action Subcommittee for Corellian Trade Spine Defense - responsible for the asset relocation. Aid to Duro during the attack should have come from Iseno, but those warships (whose complement remains classified) were also redistributed to Rodia.

"What was initially categorized as a bureaucratic misfiling has proven to be a direct and intentional act of unauthorized reallocation," states the report. "An analysis of financial transactions and communiques prove Iseno's willing collusion in the act, in exchange for millions of credits and promised rebuilding contracts on Ando."

"How could this have happened?" asked Jorrigar SoBilles, a prominent Duros businessbeing. "This proves that the Senate cannot be trusted to wage this war. For the sake of other worlds that fall in the crosshairs of General Grievous, I hope that a more authoritative body helms the defense."

SBI officials denied allegations that all prominent Rodian politicians were being investigated for similar deceptions, though they did confirm that Executive Administrator Dar Wac had been questioned and cleared of any suspicions.

"Please, do not turn this into an issue of race," said Barrezz. "We are simply trying to find the avenues through which such deceptions could be carried."

Though the office of the Supreme Chancellor refrained from comment, Rotunda insiders expect a full review of the structures and policies of Senate Action Subcommittees, with their dissolution possible in the near future.

Senators Lexi Dio (Uyter) and Padme Amidala (Naboo), vocal proponents of sector rights of autonomy, have expressed concern over any such changes. 'This poor example should not dictate sweeping policy changes,' said Senator Dio. "Do not let the actions of two corrupt Senators paint the entire body as corrupt."

"While we join our colleagues in shock and disapproval of these Senators' acts, we do not want to hear the Senate's voice silenced in these trying times," said Senator Amidala. "Already there are cries for the Chancellor to directly steer the war; today, I heard esteemed Duros leaders demand that a human be placed in charge of battlefronts that overlap rival homeworlds; I cannot believe that these short-sighted reactionary cries could become policy."

20 bby

Changing Seasons

They came out of nowhere as Obi-Wan Kenobi flew his Faraway-class scout ship high above the wide expanse of checkered fields: three battle droids on STAPs, firing their twin blasters at him for all they were worth.

From the droid socket behind Obi-Wan, the scout's R3 unit gave a startled electronic yelp. "I see them," Obi-Wan soothed him, throwing power to the aft shields and wishing fleetingly he had his usual Aethersprite starfighter instead of a sensor-loaded spotter ship. Still, two years of warfare had taught him how to deal with STAPs, and the scout ought to have enough power to pull this off. "Hang on," he warned the droid and pulled back hard on the control bar.

The noise of blaster impacts cut off abruptly as he stood the scout on its tail and shot upward, leaving the STAPs far behind. Maneuverable though they were, the little droid carriers didn't have nearly the climbing capability to match a maneuver like this. Obi-Wan continued starward for another few

seconds, then shoved the control bar forward, flipping the scout into a full-power dive.

It was a stunt he'd first seen Anakin pull several months ago, and he'd taken the brash young Padawan to task about it afterward. The younger man had countered with the unassailable logic that, first, he'd survived and, second, the trick had worked. Since then he'd used it at least three more times, with the same record of success.

Anakin would be highly amused if he ever found out Obi-Wan had tried it himself. Fortunately, Anakin was a dozen light-years away. Stretching out to the Force, Obi-Wan added power to the dive and closed in for the kill.

The droids saw him coming, of course. One of them leaned his STAP backward, trying to bring his blasters to bear on the ship screaming down on him from directly above, while the other two shot off in opposite directions as they tried to get out from under the dive.

But no defensive programming in the galaxy could compensate for the STAP's basic design limitations. The first droid wobbled violently, nearly toppling backward as its center of mass moved too far away from its antigravity projector. The other two, running now with their blasters pointed the wrong direction, were in equally fatal postures. And neither programming nor design could take into account the accuracy of a Jedi gunner with the Force as his ally. Three bursts from the scout's laser cannon, and the droids and their STAPs had disintegrated into flaming rubble.

Pulling back on the control rod, Obi-Wan leveled out again, wincing a little as he watched the smoking debris rain onto the ground below. From the large neat patches of stubble he could see all over the plain, it was clear the farmers were starting to bring in their crops, and chunks of twisted metal and plastic were not something their massive harvesting machines were designed to deal with. "At least we now know for sure that the Separatists have a base here," he commented to Arthree. Lifting his gaze from the ground below, he looked thoughtfully around the horizon.

It was about as unspectacular a landscape as he had ever seen. The farmland stretched as far north and south as he could see, squares of tan and brown and dark yellow dotted with widely scattered clusters of farm buildings. On the horizon to the west, a low ridge of gray mountains cut across the view, running

north to south. Another, much closer set of cliffs rose along the east, paralleling the first range. A little ways to the southeast, the monotony of the second set of cliffs was broken by a gushing white-water river that emerged through a narrow gorge in the rock, washing violently into the valley and slowly calming as its banks widened and it turned toward the north. An intricate network of irrigation canals led away from the river, providing water for the entire valley. In the distance near the northern horizon, the towers and buildings of a modest city could be seen nestled up against the riverbank.

R3 gave a questioning warble. "No, I don't see anything, either," Obi-Wan said. "Let's see if we can get them to launch another attack." Taking a deep breath, he dropped the scout's nose downward, leveling out barely thirty meters above the ground and slowing to a crawl. Alternating his attention between the horizon and his sensor displays, he stretched out to the Force.

He felt a warning flicker and twisted the control rod hard. But it was too late. With a thunderous concussion and a screech of metal, the scout's starboard wing exploded, sending shrapnel careening off the cockpit canopy and sending him into a twisting drop toward the ground.

He pulled hard on the control rod, his free hand darting across the board as he tried to key in the emergency backup systems. But he was too close to the ground, and there simply wasn't enough time. A forest of tan-colored stalks shot up in front of him, and with a violent jolt the scout slammed hard into the ground.

* * *

"What do you mean he went on ahead?" Anakin Skywalker demanded, glaring at Task Force Commander Fivvic as the tall Barabel stood beside the deck officer's desk. The deck officer, for his part, hunched diligently over his datapad and pretended he wasn't there. "Who told him he could do that?"

"Two points, Padawan Skywalker," the tall Barabel replied stiffly, and Anakin could sense the reflexive anger of his species stirring beneath the surface. Barabels were highly respectful of Jedi, pathologically so, in Anakin's opinion. But that respect didn't always translate to Jedi-in-training, particularly not when the Jedi-in-training was criticizing a full-fledged Jedi Knight. "One: As a command-rank officer, General Kenobi needs no one's permission to carry out

his duties as he sees fit. Two: With you and your wing of the survey team delayed, he thought his time would be best utilized by beginning the scouting."

Unfortunately, both points made sense. "Fine," Anakin conceded. "How soon can we go after him?"

Fivvic half turned to look at the scout ships scattered around the hangar deck, Anakin's Jedi starfighter off to one side looking like a strange cousin at a family picnic. "You took a beating out there," the Barabel said. "Some repairs can wait. Others must be made before we can leave."

Anakin took a deep breath, trying hard to cultivate the patience Obi-Wan was always on his case about. "How soon?"

"Three days. Possibly four."

Anakin felt his throat tighten as he watched the maintenance team moving purposefully among the damaged scouts. Three days. An eternity, particularly in the middle of a war.

Still, Obi-Wan was a Jedi Knight, and there were only rumors that the Separatists had moved into Dagro in the first place. There was a fair chance that the rumors were wrong and that Obi-Wan was wasting his time looking.

So why was Anakin getting an uncomfortable tingle up his spine?

"I presume," Fivvic went on with only a trace of sarcasm, "that four days will be acceptable?"

Gently, Anakin stroked his mechanical right hand. "Make it three," he said, "and you've got a deal."

* * *

Slowly, Obi-Wan drifted back to consciousness, with a dark sense of disorientation and an even darker sense of urgency. Carefully, not moving, he eased his eyes open . . .

To find himself gazing into the faces of a young boy and an even younger girl.

"There," the girl said, rather smugly. "See? I told you he wasn't dead."

"Okay, fine," the boy grumped. "So he's not dead. Yet."

"Hopefully, not for a long time," Obi-Wan agreed, looking past the two children and trying to orient himself. He was half sitting, half lying in the middle of a patch of broken and flattened grain stalks, his back partially propped up against something hard and metallic. Off to his left he could see the crumpled nose of his scout and could smell the acrid scent of burning plastic. "Did you two get me out of my ship?" he asked the children.

"Dad did that," the boy said, still sounding a little miffed that he'd been wrong about Obi-Wan's condition. "He went to get the cart to get you out of here."

"A cart?" Carefully, Obi-Wan turned his head to look up over his shoulder, wincing at the twinges from his neck. He was leaning against the side of one of the harvesters he'd seen working the fields, one of the massive catches of the bin dumper sitting directly over his head. "Couldn't he have used this?"

"He could if he'd wanted to wreck all the sargeet between here and the house," the girl said with exaggerated patience. "Are you a soldier?"

"He's not a soldier, he's a Jedi," the boy put in before Obi-Wan could answer. "See? He's got a lightsaber."

Obi-Wan looked down to see the end of his lightsaber peeking out from inside his tunic. "Actually, I'm both," he told them, tucking the weapon back out of sight. Getting his hands beneath him, he started to push himself up.

And stifled a grunt of pain as agony shot through his right leg. "I don't think you ought to do that," the girl said. "Dad said you probably wouldn't be able to walk."

"Dad was right," Obi-Wan said, easing himself back onto the ground. "My name's Obi-Wan Kenobi. Who are you?"

"I'm Kit Swens," the boy identified. "This is my sister, Zizzy. This is our farm you crashed into."

"Sorry about that," Obi-Wan apologized, searching the sky within his field of view as he stretched out with the Force. There was no sign yet of a follow-up

attack, but it could come at any time. "If we don't want to damage any more of it, we need to get me out of sight," he added, trying to look around the side of the harvester. "Arthree?"

There was no answer. "Dad said your droid looked dead," Kit offered.

Dead, or else gone dormant. Republic scout droids were designed to do that, if capture seemed inevitable, to try to keep the Separatists from pulling anything useful out of their databanks. "How does the rest of the ship look?" he asked.

"Pretty much the same." Kit craned his neck. "Here he comes."

Obi-Wan frowned, listening. No hum of repulsorlifts, but he thought he could hear rhythmic footsteps over the wind-rustle of the grain stalks. A moment later, a pair of slender lop-horned zeles appeared around the side of the harvester, harnessed together and pulling a wheeled wooden cart. A large bearded man sat on a bench seat at the front of the cart with a rein stick in his hand. He gave Obi-Wan an evaluating look as he brought the cart to a halt. "Awake, I see," he said. "How bad is it?"

"Nothing serious, but I will need transport," Obi-Wan told him. "And a place to hide."

"I can supply the first," the man said, setting the rein stick onto the seat beside him and jumping down to the ground. "I'm not so sure about the second."

"One's not going to do much good without the other," Obi-Wan pointed out as the man took his arm and pulled him upright. "The Separatist forces could be back at any minute to finish the job."

"Your best bet's going to be Vale City," the man said as he walked them to the cart, taking most of Obi-Wan's weight onto himself. "I can try to get you there."

"Is that the city way to the north?" Obi-Wan asked. "If so, we'll never make it that far."

"You rather hide in the fields?" the man countered. "That's about all there is between here and Vale."

"How about one of your outbuildings?" Obi-Wan suggested, nodding at the zeles. "In with your animals, maybe, where they'll help mask my lifeform readings."

"Forget it," the man grunted as he heaved Obi-Wan up over the side and into the back of the cart. "I'm not risking my family and farm for you. I'm sure not going to help you drag your war here to Dagro. Kit, Zizzy -- into the cart."

"Listen to me," Obi-Wan said quietly, propping himself up on one arm. "I was attacked by Trade Federation battle droids. Battle droids don't travel in small groups. That means the Separatists are here. If they're here, so is the war."

"Not if we don't let you fight them," the man said, giving his daughter a boost up onto the bench seat beside her brother and then climbing up himself. "And spare me the line about how the Republic wants to protect us from the forces of evil. Coruscant never paid a crippled droid's worth of attention to us before all this blew up." He picked up the rein stick and twitched it, and with a jerk the cart started forward. "We'll drop the kids at the house and head for Vale."

Obi-Wan looked at the sky. It was only noon, but even at the speed zeles could make, getting to the city would take the rest of the day and then some. "I don't suppose you have anything a little faster."

"Look around you," the other growled. "Seventy percent of our crop is sargheet. In case you hadn't noticed -- and you probably hadn't -- the bottom fell out of the sargheet market half a year ago." He gestured toward the zeles. "Stripe and Trotter eat crop stubble and excrete fertilizer. Landspeeders eat money and excrete debt."

"I understand," Obi-Wan said, grimacing. It was all too easy sometimes for a Jedi to forget what the life of the ordinary Republic citizen was like. "My apologies. My name's Obi-Wan Kenobi, by the way."

"Kirlan Swens," the man said reluctantly. "Jedi, right?"

"Yes."

"Figures."

Ten minutes later they reached the Swens homestead, an old but well-kept two-storey house beside a large barn and surrounded by a half dozen smaller storage sheds. Kirlan had pulled the cart up to the barn and the children were getting out when Obi-Wan finally heard the sound he'd been expecting ever since that sudden explosion had crippled his scout ship.

"STAPs," he said, glancing up at the sky. There was nothing in sight, which meant they were coming from the west, the direction currently blocked by the barn. "A lot of them."

"Blast it," Kirlan snarled under his breath, his eyes darting around the sky. "You kids -- get in the house. Tell your mother to play dumb. Come on, Jedi, move it."

With the harvester still out in the field, most of the barn's huge expanse was empty. "Over here," Kirlan grunted as he half carried Obi-Wan toward a large, escape-pod-sized object in the corner. A harvester's cab/engine module, Obi-Wan tentatively identified it. "I keep it for parts," Kirlan went on. "There should be enough room for you in the engine compartment. Can you get that ventilated access panel open?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, stretching out to the Force and pulling open the panel. The empty space behind it looked a little tight, but with a little squeezing it should do. Reaching up to the lip, he pulled himself up and inside, trying to keep his leg from banging against the side as he did so. Wriggling his way into a more or less comfortable position, he reached out with the Force and pulled the panel closed. "How does it look?" he called.

"Should work if you keep your mouth closed," Kirlan called back. "I'll bring the zeles in and tether them beside you. Don't budge until I come get you."

* * *

It took the Separatist forces over an hour to make their way from the crash site to the Swens homestead. From the noises coming faintly through the ventilation grille, it sounded like the searchers started with the house, then moved to the smaller buildings, and finally came to the barn. There was the usual amount of clanging around, the usual mechanical orders and responses, and a single bad moment when one of the battle droids pulled himself up and actually pressed a photoreceptor against the grille.

Fortunately, Obi-Wan had had the foresight to spend most of his first hour stealthily unfastening a large radiator coil and propping it up in front of the grille. The droid saw what appeared to be a compartment full of machinery and hopped back down again.

A few minutes later, the whole squad trooped out of the barn. A few minutes after that, he heard the sounds of the STAPs lifting into the sky to continue the search.

And then, as he'd suspected it would, the real wait began.

It was after dark before Kirlan finally returned to the barn. "Jedi?" he called softly from below the access panel.

"Still here," Obi-Wan assured him, moving the camouflaging radiator coil out of the way. "Things quiet out there?"

"Quiet enough," the other grunted. There was a creak of metal, and Obi-Wan felt a rush of cool air as the panel was pulled open. "Come on -- we need to talk."

They crossed the empty floor of the barn and emerged into the night air. Obi-Wan had taken the time since the droids' departure to do a series of short healing trances, and although his leg wasn't completely healed it was good enough for him to walk without Kirlan's assistance. He could sense the farmer's surprise at that, but he made no comment.

It was as he led the way across the yard that Obi-Wan first sensed the other presences ahead of him in the house. "You have company?" he asked mildly.

Kirlan gave him a sideways look as he climbed the steps to the back porch. "I invited a few neighbors," he said. Pulling open the door, he gestured down a hallway stretching in front of them. "After you."

Stifling a grimace, Obi-Wan walked down the hallway. At the end, a large but homey conversation room opened off to the left.

And in the conversation room were Kirlan's guests. An entire packed room full of them.

"Hello," he said, stopping in the entryway and nodding to the group. There were men and women both, he saw, all with the hardened, sunburned skin that seemed to be the common look of farmers all across the galaxy. For their part, the people looked him over in silence, their emotions roiling with suspicion and fear. "I'm General Obi-Wan Kenobi of the army of the Republic."

A low murmur ran through the crowd, the mood darkening even further. "A general yet," someone muttered, and Obi-Wan silently berated himself for his thoughtlessness. The title, which had sounded so foreign to his ears when it had first been bestowed upon him, now rolled a little too easily off his tongue.

"I was right," one of the men growled, glaring accusingly at Obi-Wan.

"The war's here. And he's the one who brought it."

"Easy, Hanco," Kirlan cautioned.

"Easy, my foot," Hanco shot back, his eyes still on Obi-Wan. "Well, Jedi? You have an answer for that?"

"It depends on what you mean by 'the war,'" Obi-Wan said evenly. "If you mean the struggle for the Republic's survival, then the war is everywhere." He looked around the room. "If what you mean is battles and death and destruction, Dagro might still be able to avoid that."

"Why are you here?" a woman asked.

"We heard rumors that the Separatists had set up a presence on your world," Obi-Wan told her. "I came to see if the reports were true. Apparently, they were."

"Maybe; maybe not," Hanco countered. "We never saw anything like those battle droids until you showed up. Maybe they followed you in, hey?"

"Possible, but unlikely," Obi-Wan said. "And, actually, the fact that you haven't seen them before now is a good sign. That might mean they're still in the process of moving in and can hopefully be chased away with a minimum of trouble."

"Is that what you're going to do?" a youthful voice spoke up. Obi-Wan blinked as he focused for the first time on the far right of the room. Kit and Zizzy were sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of a seated woman, presumably their mother, both children gazing up at him with wide eyes. "Excuse me?"

"I said, Are you going to chase them away?" Zizzy repeated.

Obi-Wan glanced up at their mother's stony expression, then looked down at the children again. "Even a Jedi wouldn't be so bold as to tackle an enemy base by himself," he told them solemnly. "No, at this point all I'm planning is to wait for the rest of my survey team to come get me." There was a subtle but definite lowering of the tension in the room. Clearly, there had been some fear that he was here to draft them all into Republic military service. "So what do you want from us?" one of the men asked.

"Only that you don't betray me to the Separatists." Obi-Wan looked at Kirlan. "And perhaps that Kirlan will allow me to help around the farm."

Kirlan's eyes narrowed. "What kind of help?"

"Whatever needs doing," Obi-Wan said. "You told me that Coruscant never paid a crippled droid's worth of attention to you. Maybe I can make up a little for that neglect."

"You could start by raising the price of sargheet," someone suggested. A small but genuine ripple of laughter twittered around the room.

"I was thinking more along the lines of helping get the crops in," Obi-Wan said with a smile. They weren't opposed to the Republic, he realized now, or even to Obi-Wan himself. They were simply hardworking people who didn't want their lives made any harder than they already were.

"Actually, what I need most right now is someone to strip my crop stubble," Kirlan said. "I'll show you how in the morning. Everyone else, thanks for coming. And if something made of metal and carrying a blaster comes around asking questions, play dumb."

With a rustle of chairs and a low buzz of conversation, the crowd got to its feet and began to drift out, a few people lingering behind to talk to Kirlan or his wife. Obi-Wan stayed at the door, exchanging silent nods with the farmers as

they filed past, until finally only he and the Swens family were left. "You must be Kirlan's wife," Obi-Wan said, stepping back into the room and nodding to the woman still seated with the children.

"I'm Trissa Swens," she confirmed, nodding back at him, her face marginally less stony but still unsmiling. "I wish I could say it was an honor to have you here, General Kenobi."

"But with Separatist forces hunting me, all you can see is the threat I pose to your family?" Obi-Wan suggested.

Kirlan took a step toward him. "Stay out of my wife's mind, Jedi," he warned.

"I wasn't in it," Obi-Wan said tiredly, a ripple of frustration and sadness pouring through him. "It's just that I've been fighting this war long enough to know how people react to me."

Trissa's lip twitched, and Obi-Wan caught her flicker of guilt. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it to sound that way."

"No apology needed," Obi-Wan said, rubbing his temples. "Unless you've got other questions, though, I'd like to go back to the barn and get some sleep."

Trissa looked at her husband. "There's no need to go to the barn," Kirlan said, a bit gruffly. "We have plenty of room here in the house."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said. "But tonight, at least, I'd rather stay outside. The droids might come back; and if there's going to be a fight I don't want it to be here in the house."

Kirlan's lips puckered. "I appreciate that," he said, a little grudgingly. "I'll bring you some blankets and a field mattress. Some food, too -- I guess you missed dinner." He looked Obi-Wan up and down.

"And I'd better get you some clothes," he added. "That outfit might blend in okay in town, but there's no way anyone out here would wear anything that flimsy."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said again, taking a step down the hallway. "Good night, everyone. I'll see you in the morning."

* * *

If the battle droids did indeed pass through the area again that night, they were considerate enough to be quiet about it. Obi-Wan slept soundly, not waking up until Kit arrived a little after sunrise to bring him in to breakfast.

The meal was quick but pleasant, with little of the underlying tension he'd sensed the evening before. Apparently, a good night's sleep -- perhaps, more importantly, an uneventful night's sleep -- had helped calm some of their fears.

After breakfast, Kirlan took Obi-Wan back to the barn to a huge stack of ten-centimeter-long grain stalks piled beside a bin made of wire mesh.

"Crop stubble," he identified it. "The lower sections of the sargheet stalks. By the time we've finished the harvest, we'll hopefully have enough of this to feed the zeles for the rest of the year."

He picked up one of the stalks and pointed at a dozen fine blue bristles attached to the base and sticking up about half the stalk's length. "But only if we pull these bristles off first," he went on. "If the animals eat them, they accumulate in their digestive systems and you end up with a dead animal."

Obi-Wan picked up a stalk and experimentally tugged at one of the bristles. It came off in his fingers with far less effort than he'd expected. "Yeah, they come off real easy," Kirlan agreed. "Which is why they'll come off in a zeles's gut, too. Anyway. That pail right there is for the bristles -- Trissa makes a nice soup stock out of them. The clean stubble goes into that wire bin. Got it?"

"Got it," Obi-Wan said, suppressing the reflexive urge to suggest that a droid might do the job more efficiently. Obviously it could. Just as obviously, Kirlan couldn't afford to buy one.

"Great," Kirlan said, moving toward the door. "The kids and I will be out in the fields all day, but Trissa will bring you some lunch when it's time."

"Will you be taking your lunch out with you?"

Kirlan hesitated. "I'll have something for the kids," he said. "Trissa and I usually don't bother with more than two meals a day."

Clearly another cost-cutting move. "Sounds very Jedi," Obi-Wan told him, keeping his voice casual. "Please tell her not to bother with any lunch for me either."

For a moment Kirlan's eyes seemed to search Obi-Wan's face. "In that case, I'll send the kids to bring you in when it's dinnertime," he said. "Have fun."

Rather to Obi-Wan's surprise, he did. It seemed sometimes like his whole life since the Battle of Geonosis had been nothing but combat, life-or-death decisions, and long days of hyperspace travel. To do work that was useful yet took little mental effort was a welcome change of pace, soothing and satisfying. By the time Kit and Zizzy came to get him, he had the bucket half full of blue bristles and the kind of inner contentment and peace he usually got only from a period of Jedi meditation.

"How'd it go?" Kirlan asked as the children led their guest toward a large wooden table on one side of the kitchen.

"Very well," Obi-Wan told him. "I finished about a quarter of the pile."

Kirlan looked at the children with lifted eyebrows. "He did," Kit confirmed.

"I'm impressed," Kirlan said. "Actually, I'm ..." He hesitated, then gave a microscopic shrug. "To be honest, I'm surprised you were willing to take the job. It's usually the sort of work the children end up with."

"I was doing it before you got here," Zizzy said, crinkling her nose. "It gets pretty boring."

"Boring or not, there's nothing wrong with honest work," Obi-Wan told her. "You wouldn't know it from some of the officials who've occasionally visited the valley," Trissa said scornfully from beside the stove.

"Particularly the women. They seem horrified that people actually live this way."

"I know a few officials like that myself," Obi-Wan agreed with a smile. "How'd the field work go?"

"We're getting there," Kirlan said, gesturing him toward one of the chairs at the table. "I've been trying to figure a way to sneak you out of here and up to the city. But those blasted battle droids have been zipping around overhead all day."

"Really," Obi-Wan said as he sat down. He hadn't heard any STAPs from the barn. "How high were they?"

"Pretty high," Kirlan said, sitting down at the head of the table. "You had to look close to tell they weren't birds."

"Did they ever come lower?"

"Not that I saw," Kirlan said. "You think they're worried about an attack from the ground?"

"Doesn't seem likely," Obi-Wan said, frowning. "All my long-range weapons are still with my scout ship. They've surely scooped up the wreckage and taken it away by now."

"Unless they think you're not the only one here," Kit suggested as he maneuvered a bowl of vegetables onto the table. "Maybe they think you're trying to sucker them into a trap."

"We can hope so," Obi-Wan told him. "There's nothing I'd like better right now than for them to keep their distance."

"When will your survey team arrive?" Trissa asked as she set a platter containing a small roasted avian in front of her husband.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "I don't know. My Padawan was held up bringing his part of the group, which is why I went on ahead."

"That wasn't very smart," Zizzy said primly as she set a glass of water beside Obi-Wan's plate. "Even I know better than to go to a strange place alone."

"I can't argue with you there," Obi-Wan said ruefully, taking a welcome sip of the water. "He was due in at the rendezvous yesterday, but from his report I know some of the ships had been damaged. Trouble is, I don't know how badly. It'll probably be several more days before they get here."

Kirlan hissed between his teeth. "That's a long time to keep someone hidden in a barn."

"At least, in the same barn," Obi-Wan agreed. "But if enough of your neighbors are willing to help, maybe I can barn-hop my way to Vale City."

"You mean like traveling to one homestead at a time?" Kit asked.

"Exactly," Obi-Wan said. "I'd go at night, maybe slung underneath one of your zeles to help disguise my infrared signature."

"Sounds risky," Kirlan rumbled. He picked up a knife and fork and started to carve the meat off the avian. "Not just for you, either."

"It couldn't hurt to ask them," Trissa said firmly, sitting down beside her husband.

"I suppose not," Kirlan said. "Probably not a good idea to use the comlinks, but I'll be seeing Pickers and Jurvi out in their fields tomorrow. I'll talk to them then."

* * *

Kirlan and the children returned the next evening with the news that Pickers and Jurvi were indeed willing, if not exactly enthusiastic. Trissa had made a thick and tangy stew for dinner, and as the Swenses ate they discussed plans for Obi-Wan's departure.

But for that night, at least, all their plans came to nothing. The battle droids resumed their patrols as the stars appeared overhead, dropping lower in the sky as if anticipating an escape attempt on the part of their quarry. Sitting in the barn listening to the sounds of the STAPs, Obi-Wan finally gave up and settled down to get some sleep.

He was up before sunrise the next morning and had already put in half an hour of work before Zizzy called him to breakfast. A quick meal and he was back at work, determined to trim the pile of crop stubble down to half its size before dinner. By the time the others returned he had very nearly achieved his goal, with a warm glow of victory that lasted only as long as it took Kit to back the

zeles and cart up to the stack and unload the additional stubble they'd collected during the day.

They all ate dinner together, and Obi-Wan returned to the barn to prepare to leave. Once again, by midnight it was clear that the droids' vigilance would make that impossible, and he reluctantly returned to his field mattress to sleep.

It was on the fourth morning, just as he finished getting dressed, that the droids finally came.

* * *

With his ear pressed against a cracked panel in the barn wall, he listened intently to the telltale sound of five more STAPs coming to rest out in the yard. If he'd counted correctly, that made twelve on the ground, with twelve or thirteen more running high patrol overhead. Twenty-five to one. Terrible odds, made even worse by the presence of civilians on the scene.

Especially when they were civilians he'd grown to consider friends. He stepped away from the wall and took a deep breath. "A Jedi knows only calm," he murmured to himself. Tucking his lightsaber inside the farmer's shirt Trissa had given him, he started toward the door.

He was nearly there when the panel was flung open and a battle droid strode inside. "You -- halt," he snapped, swiveling his blaster to point at Obi-Wan's chest.

"Hey, I didn't hurt anything," Obi-Wan said, holding up his hands in feigned surprise. "Really, I didn't."

The droid's head swiveled as he looked around the rest of the barn, then came back to gaze at Obi-Wan. "Come," he ordered.

The rest of the family was gathered together in a tight knot in the middle of the yard when Obi-Wan and his escort arrived, Kirlan with his arm tightly around Trissa's shoulders as she in turn pressed the two children close to her sides. Behind them, the house loomed dark and ominous against the pinks and reds of the sunrise coloring the sky behind it. Arrayed in a semicircle around them, a group of battle droids kept wary watch. "Ah," said a droid with officer

markings as Obi-Wan was marched toward the group. "The other, as expected. You -- identify."

"Hey, I didn't take anything," Obi-Wan protested. "I just slept there, okay? That's all I did."

"Identify," the officer repeated, more sharply this time.

"I'm Marsh Fixter," Obi-Wan said. "I just -- look, I didn't take anything, okay? I just slept there."

To Obi-Wan's mild surprise, Kirlan caught the cue. "He's nothing but a rotten tramp," the farmer growled. "I must have kicked him off my land a dozen times."

"We shall see," the officer repeated.

Carefully, Obi-Wan stretched out with the Force, reaching to the droid's optical sensors and giving them a gentle vibration. His face was certainly in the enemy-agents listing that was undoubtedly now being transmitted to the officer, but fluttering the droid's vision should blur his image just enough to make a positive identification impossible.

Apparently, it worked. "No matter," the droid said with an electronic snort. "You are a liar. You have been working in the barn for two days. Otherwise, both children would not have been free to work the fields with their father."

Obi-Wan felt his throat tighten. So that was what the high-flying droids had been looking for: an anomaly in the farmers' normal routines. He should have thought of that.

"So you are a spy," the officer concluded. "Bring them all." Obi-Wan looked at the Swenses, standing silently gazing back at him. People who had fed and clothed him, who had risked their lives to help him. He could sense their fear, both for themselves and for him.

And then he focused on the children's faces and saw the trust and calm adding a sheen of hope to the fear in their eyes. He was a Jedi, one of those who claimed to be guardians of the people; and for all the cynicism of their elders, they still believed in him. Still believed that he could and would save them.

There was a flicker in the Force ... and suddenly he knew what he had to do.

"No," he said, taking a step forward as the droids started to close in on the family. "Leave them alone."

"Or?" the officer countered.

Smiling tightly, Obi-Wan lifted a hand, stretched out to the Force, and threw the droid backward to slam hard against the ground.

The yard exploded in instant consternation. Swiveling in unison, the entire group of droids turned its blasters away from the family and toward this sudden new threat.

But they were too late. Obi-Wan snatched out his lightsaber and with a snap-hiss ignited it, the glowing blue blade throwing shadows against the darkened house. He took a step toward the Swenses, then pretended to think better of it and began backing up again.

The droids reacted exactly as he'd hoped. Their circle shifted in response, tightening in toward him and bypassing the other four humans. Obi-Wan caught Kirlan's eye and gave a fractional nod; the other nodded back and began backing slowly toward the relative safety of the house, pulling his wife and children with him.

Overhead, the STAPs were closing in as well, tightening their part of the deadly ring around him. Obi-Wan kept backing up, shifting his lightsaber back and forth. If he could keep their full attention on him for just a few more seconds...

Abruptly, he heard the STAPs behind him twitch their drives to full power. A droid voice shouted a raspy warning --

And, like an avenging angel, a Jedi starfighter shot over the house out of the rising sun, its laser cannon spitting destruction as it tore through the middle of the STAP formation.

Obi-Wan was already in motion. He leaped to one edge of the droid circle, slashing with his lightsaber, then spinning around to deflect the blaster shots belatedly coming his direction from the more distant droids. Out of the corner

of his eye he saw the Swens family running full speed toward the house, safely out of the battle area. Overhead, the rest of the survey team shot past in the starfighter's wake, its laser cannon systematically dealing with the STAPs Anakin had missed.

Smiling grimly, Obi-Wan stretched out to the Force, settling his mind and body into Jedi combat mode.

Three minutes later, it was over.

* * *

"I've heard all the stories," Kirlan said, shaking his head in amazement as he fingered the steaming mug of misti in front of him. "But I'd never actually seen a Jedi in action."

"It was cool," Kit said with barely contained excitement. "Can you teach me how to do that?"

"Kit," Trissa said reprovably as she set mugs in front of Obi-Wan and Anakin.

"Actually, I can't," Obi-Wan told him. "Not unless you were born with the ability."

His comlink beeped, and he pulled it out. "Yes?"

"All clear," Commander Fivvic's voice came. "We got most of the backups, except for a few who managed to escape into that big gorge to the east."

"So that's it?" Trissa asked.

"It is for now," Anakin told her. "We'll alert Coruscant that there's definitely a Separatist presence here, and when they can free up a task force they'll send it here to clear them out." He looked at Kit and Zizzy. "That is, if they don't give up and run away before that."

"But you'll be leaving?" Zizzy asked.

"No," Obi-Wan said. "Not just yet."

Anakin looked at him, and he could sense the Padawan's surprise. "Why not?"

"Because there's something wrong here," Obi-Wan said, trying to put his thoughts and impressions into words. "That droid commander said that they'd seen Kit and Zizzy in the fields when at least one of them should have been working on the crop stubble. But that kind of reasoning is way beyond combat droids. That means there must be some Neimoidians or other living beings here as well."

"Doesn't sound right for a small garrison," Anakin said, his voice suddenly thoughtful.

"It isn't," Obi-Wan agreed. "But it's exactly right for a research or development facility ... and my scout was taken out by an attack I didn't see coming."

"A new weapon," Anakin murmured, gazing out into space.

"Looks like it," Obi-Wan agreed. "And Fivvic said that the surviving droids just now fled into the gorge. How would they know there was enough room for them to fly in there unless they'd already checked it out?"

"That could be where their base is," Kirlan suggested. "Those cliffs go back ten kilometers. Plenty of room in there for any kind of facility they want."

"I agree," Obi-Wan said. "But when they first came searching for me, they didn't come from that direction. They came from the west. I remember that because the barn was blocking their view."

"That's right, they did," Kirlan murmured thoughtfully. "Huh."

"So what does that mean?" Kit asked.

"It means they took the time to circle way around so that no one would guess where their base was," Obi-Wan told him.

"But they just showed us where it is," Zizzy objected.

"Exactly," Obi-Wan said. "Which implies that whoever's in charge decided it didn't matter anymore if we knew. Which implies in turn that whatever they're doing in there is about finished."

He looked at Anakin. "Which implies that we'd better take a look while we still can."

"I don't know," Anakin said doubtfully. "The survey team's on a pretty tight schedule, and there aren't any attack teams anywhere in the sector."

"So we'll let the survey team go," Obi-Wan told him. "They can leave us your starfighter and one of the scout ships, and we'll rejoin them when we're done."

"Wait a second," Trissa put in, starting to sound alarmed. "You're the one who told us a Jedi couldn't take on a whole enemy base."

"I said a Jedi couldn't take on a base alone," Obi-Wan corrected, smiling tightly. "Now, there are two of us."

Kirilan shook his head. "Why," he said, "do I suddenly have a bad feeling about this?"

With a final salute through the canopy of his scout ship cockpit, Task Force Commander Fivvic lifted off the ground, the rest of the survey team close behind. Standing outside the Swens family barn where he'd spent the past four days, Obi-Wan Kenobi watched the ships disappear into the Dagro sky, wondering if this might possibly not be the smartest decision he'd made this month.

Beside him, Anakin Skywalker stirred. "It's not too late to call them back," he pointed out.

Obi-Wan took a deep breath. Smart or not, it was what they had to do. "Yes, it is," he said firmly.

"Good." Anakin turned to face east, holding a hand up to shield his eyes from the early morning sun. "So they're in there, huh?"

Obi-Wan turned, too. Cutting across the vast expanse of farmland in the near distance was a line of tall, gray cliffs. A kilometer or so south of where they stood, a raging white-water river boiled out of a narrow gorge in the cliff face, the turbulence subsiding as the water spread out into a wider riverbed and

turned toward the north. "So it would seem," he told Anakin. "The trick's going to be getting in there with them."

"Flying in is definitely out," Anakin mused. "They'll be expecting that, and a gorge that narrow doesn't leave much maneuvering room. Could we rappel down from the top of the cliff?"

"That would be an awfully long rappel," Obi-Wan pointed out doubtfully, measuring the cliff face with his eyes. "At least half a kilometer. And we wouldn't know where to start -- Kirlan said the mountains run 10 kilometers back from the cliff face."

"Then there's only one approach left," Anakin said. "If we can't fly or rappel, we'll have to swim."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Obi-Wan said. "Let's go see what Kirlan says."

* * *

Kirlan Swens's response was pretty much what Obi-Wan had expected. "You two," he declared, "must be insane."

"That goes without saying," Anakin agreed. "But is it possible?"

"Not a chance," Kirlan said, gesturing them to the table. "Trissa, can you get us some misti?"

"Sure," his wife said, crossing over to the simmering urn. "You children, go work on your chores."

"Aw, Mom," 10-year-old Kit protested. "Can't we stay and listen?"

"We won't interrupt," his younger sister Zizzy added. "We promise."

"Off, both of you," Trissa said firmly. "This is grownup talk. Maybe later you can spend some more time with our guests."

Silently, clearly under protest, the children left. "First problem's the current," Kirlan said, turning back to the Jedi. "You'd need a high-speed dive boat to

make any headway, only I doubt a dive boat would have enough room to submerge in that maze of boulders where the river comes out."

"What about going in from the upstream direction?" Obi-Wan asked.

Kirilan shook his head. "The entrance to the gorge is even narrower than the exit. I don't know of any dive boat that would fit in there."

"How about a regular boat?" Anakin asked.

"They're bound to spot anything on the surface," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Could we climb our way in from the upstream end? Say, halfway up the cliffs where they might not have any sensors placed?"

"You could try rappelling," Trissa suggested as she brought a fresh pitcher of misti to the table.

"They'll be watching for intruders coming in from above," Obi-Wan told her.

"I didn't mean that kind of rappelling," Trissa said. "I meant the underwater type."

Obi-Wan blinked. "Excuse me?"

"It was something my friends and I used to do when we were younger," she explained. "You fasten a cable above the entrance to the gorge, then hold on and slide along it, letting the river current carry you downstream."

Kirilan looked at her, his mouth hanging slightly open. "Your mother told me you'd been a wild child," he said. "But that's just nuts."

"Remind me to tell you sometime about Anakin's career in Podracing," Obi-Wan said dryly. "Trissa, can this be done completely underwater, or is the river too shallow at that point?"

"We never submerged completely," Trissa said, frowning in concentration. "At least, not on purpose. But as long as we stayed in the middle of the channel, I don't remember the rocks being a problem. I think you could get far enough underwater to be hidden and still be safe. Of course, you'd need some kind of breather equipment."

"Those we've got," Obi-Wan told her. "What do you think, Anakin?"

The younger man shrugged. "If it was easy, everyone would do it," he said.

"Let's go see how much cable we've got with us."

* * *

The river was a narrow torrent of foam and spray cutting through a groove in the mountains as it raced toward the taller line of cliffs ahead and the valley beyond them. "We usually started further downstream, right at the beginning of the cliffs," Trissa said, her voice barely audible over the noise. "I don't know any good places to attach your cables up here."

"We'll find something," Obi-Wan assured her, looking around. It would indeed have been simpler to start at the gorge itself, but the Separatists would have sensors planted there to watch for intruders. Here, a couple of turnings upstream, they could hopefully get far enough underwater to slip in unnoticed.

"How about that?" Anakin asked, pointing to a short but thick-trunked tree growing between two large boulders on the far side. Without waiting for an answer, he did a Jedi leap over the roiling water to land beside it. He gave the trunk a couple of experimental tugs, then turned and nodded.

Obi-Wan nodded back. "Looks like we're set," he told Kirlan and Trissa. "Thanks for your help. And thank Pickers again from us for letting you borrow his landspeeder."

"Sure." Kirlan looked down at the river. "Do you want us to wait for you someplace?"

"No, just go home," Obi-Wan said. "We'll let you know if and when we need a pick up."

"All right," Kirlan said. "Good luck." Turning, he started picking his way through the boulders back toward where they'd left the landspeeder. Trissa lingered for one last look at Obi-Wan, then nodded silently and followed her husband.

Obi-Wan watched until they were out of sight. Then, stretching out to the Force, he leaped over the river to where Anakin had just finished fastening his

line around the tree. "Trissa doesn't seem happy about this," the younger man commented.

"She was pretty angry with her husband for bringing me to her home after I got shot down," Obi-Wan explained as he pulled out some cord from his cable dispenser. "She was polite enough about it, but it was obvious. I think she's working through some guilt over that."

"Well, I sure wouldn't want to risk my family for a stranger," Anakin said darkly. "I mean...if I had a family."

Obi-Wan's throat tightened as he felt the ache in his Padawan's heart. It was two years after his mother's death, yet her absence was still as fresh as the day Anakin had lost her. Someday, he would have to get the young man to tell him the whole story of that incident.

"That water's not going to get any warmer," Anakin pointed out, and Obi-Wan could sense him pushing the pain away into the back of his mind.

"Right," Obi-Wan said, checking his line and then Anakin's. The tree they were using had broad purple leaves; pinching off a handful of them, he stuffed them into his tunic.

"What's that for?" Anakin asked.

"You'll see," Obi-Wan told him, pulling his Aquata A99 breather from its pouch with a twinge of painful memories of his own. The breather would always remind him of that mission to Naboo, and the loss of his Master Qui-Gon...

He shook the thoughts away. "Watch out for sensors," he said and set the breather between his teeth. Getting a grip on his cable dispenser, he waded into the river.

He'd made it only knee deep before a sudden surge in the flow knocked his feet out from under him. He toppled backward, but Anakin was ready and caught him in a steadying Force grip. Regaining his balance, he played out the cable and lowered himself the rest of the way.

Once, a long time ago, he'd been caught in the open during one of the sudden monsoon rainstorms of Matarri, where huge drops driven by strong downdraft

winds came down with enough force to bruise the skin and occasionally even kill small animals. This was very much the same sensation, except that instead of lukewarm tropical rain, the water here was mind-numbingly cold. It pounded his head and shoulders, tearing at his hair and tunic, buffeting against him and trying to twist his head sideways as he moved deeper into the stream.

Half-a-meter below the surface, thankfully, most of the turbulence was gone. But the current was, if anything, even stronger. Instead of a rainstorm, he now felt as if he was being dragged through a lake by an angry acklay running at full speed. Bowing his head slightly to try to see past his feet, wincing as the shift in posture funneled a torrent of the icy water straight down the back of his neck, he started downstream.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something large ease past him. It was Anakin; but unlike Obi-Wan's more cautious feet-first approach, his Padawan had turned himself around and was heading face-first down the river, his cable dispenser held tightly against his chest, the line caught in a loose grip between his boots for stability. He looked at Obi-Wan as he passed, his face crinkling with a brief grin behind his breather, and continued on. Mentally shaking his head, hoping the other didn't brain himself against a rock, Obi-Wan followed.

They had cleared their second curve when he felt Anakin's warning flash into his mind. Stop!

He sent an acknowledgment and slowed to a cautious crawl. Anakin was waiting a short distance ahead, five meters back from a point where the sunlight streaming through the foam abruptly faded away, marking the entrance to the gorge. There, fastened to a boulder at the dividing line between light and gloom, was the small black disk of a visual scanner. Apparently, the Separatists weren't taking chances on even such an unlikely back door as this.

Unfortunately for them, their security setup hadn't taken Jedi into account. Getting a one-handed grip on his cable, Obi-Wan dug out the tree leaves he'd collected earlier. He held them up in front of Anakin's eyes, caught the other's flash of understanding, and let them go.

The current caught the leaves, sending them skittering down the channel. Stretching out to the Force, Obi-Wan guided their paths, running them around and past the scanner. Then, just as the second-to-last leaf was passing, he

caught it in a Force grip, holding it quivering in front of the sensor as if its stem had been caught by a crack in the rocks.

Anakin was gone in an instant, sliding down his cable at typically reckless speed. Obi-Wan was right behind him, keeping the leaf in front of the scanner until they were safely past, then releasing it to shoot past him and disappear. Slowing to a safer speed, watching for more sensors, the two Jedi continued on.

With no idea where along the 10-kilometer length the Separatists had their base, Obi-Wan had had some concerns that he and Anakin would run out of either air or cable before they reached it. As it turned out, though, there was no need for worry. They had gone only a couple of kilometers when the current suddenly subsided to a manageable level, and a moment later, he spotted a forest of large pillars rising from the boulders at the bottom of the river at a point where the dim light from overhead went completely black. Tapping Anakin's shoulder, Obi-Wan gestured, and together they worked their way over to one of the pillars to their left.

They floated to the surface and found themselves a couple of meters below the edge of a permacrete platform spanning the entire width of the gorge. The pillar was too wide to get their arms around, but the steady hammering of the river had gouged handhold-sized pits in its surface, and with only a little trouble, they were able to climb up to the platform. Carefully, they eased their heads over the edge.

It was a Separatist research facility all right, exactly as Obi-Wan had expected. What he hadn't expected was that it would be this big. There were at least a dozen buildings perched on the permacrete slab, some of them the relatively compact size of research labs and power generators, others the larger droid storage and recharging facilities, and others were larger equipment storage or repair shops. One building near the center was definitely Neimoidian-style living quarters.

But it was a pair of extra-large buildings butting up against the opposite sides of the cavern that sent a shiver down his back, a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold water he'd been soaking in for the past hour. Each was three stories high with walls that were featureless except for wide doors at ground level and rows of small windows beneath the roof overhang.

Exactly the sort of buildings that might house major fabrication facilities.

"Whoa," Anakin murmured. "They've been busy, haven't they?"

"Indeed," Obi-Wan agreed grimly, returning his breather to its pouch. "You see just past the buildings, how the gorge narrows again? Looks to me like this whole section of cavern is artificial, carved out to give themselves more room."

"Makes the whole soggy trip worthwhile," Anakin said. He pointed to the buildings that had caught Obi-Wan's attention. "I vote we start with those big ones along the sides. They're pressed pretty close to the cavern walls, so there shouldn't be anyone wandering around back there to bother us, and those windows look big enough to get through."

"Assuming the builders bothered with windows on the side facing the wall," Obi-Wan said doubtfully.

"They did," Anakin assured him. "Those windows are mostly for ventilation, and the builders will have wanted to take advantage of the airflow along the wall."

Obi-Wan shrugged, peering upward. High overhead, though still protected by the walls of the gorge, he could see the black spots of STAPs on patrol. Just as well he and Anakin hadn't tried coming down that way. "One way to find out," he said. "Nice and quiet, now."

They dropped back into the surging water and worked their way to the left through the forest of supports. When Obi-Wan judged they'd gone far enough, he carved a set of hand- and footholds in the rock with his lightsaber and climbed up beneath the platform. Alert for signs of danger, he carefully sliced a large hole through the permacrete, using the Force to lower the plug into the water. There were no Neimoidians or droids visible when he poked his head up, and a minute later, he and Anakin were standing in the narrow gap between the building and the cavern wall.

Anakin had been right: The windows they'd seen were indeed repeated on this side -- and many were open for ventilation. Tucking his lightsaber into his belt, he made a Force-assisted jump up to one of the open windows, grabbing the edge with hooked fingertips. Pulling himself up, he peered inside.

He had expected to find a building filled to the ceiling with the heavy-duty fabrication machinery. To his surprise, the building was largely empty with most of its research equipment pushed back around the edges with only a meter of ventilation space between the walls and the various consoles. A dozen Neimoidians were gathered around a large mat lying in the center of the floor, while a number of worker droids worked at various assembly tables that had been set up just inside the ring of consoles. A maze of crane tracks crisscrossed the ceiling, and a service catwalk ran around the entire interior beneath the line of windows. After pulling himself through the window, Obi-Wan dropped flat onto the catwalk and eased his way to the edge.

He was studying the layout below when Anakin crawled in to join him. "I give up," the other murmured. "What is this place?"

"No idea," Obi-Wan said. "The equipment around the edges makes it look like a research lab. But why they're not using the middle of the floor, I don't know."

"Maybe whatever they've been working on is out of the building right now?" Anakin suggested. "That big mat could be what it was resting on."

"Then why does everyone seem so interested in the mat itself?" Obi-Wan countered.

"Good point," Anakin said. "Want me to go ask them?"

"Let's try to be a bit more subtle than that, shall we?" Obi-Wan said as he studied the room below. "Maybe start by pulling the records off that R-408 computer down there. I wish we had a droid with us."

"Maybe we do," Anakin said, pointing toward the right. "Isn't that the R3 from your scout ship?"

Obi-Wan blinked in surprise. It was Arthree, all right, strapped to a tall equipment rack and hooked up to a decryption analyzer. "I should have guessed they'd bring it here from the wreckage," he said, studying the room's layout more closely. At the moment, the droid was out of the immediate line of sight of the Neimoidians gathered in the center. If he could get down from the catwalk without being seen and get behind the analyzer, he should be able to free the droid without raising the alarm. Once that was accomplished, they could move through the ventilation corridor behind the consoles and get to the R-408. "Wait here," he told Anakin, starting to gather his feet under him.

"No, I'll go," Anakin said. Before Obi-Wan could object, he grabbed the edge of the catwalk, flipped over the side, and dropped silently to the floor below. Ducking behind the nearest cabinet, he hunkered down and headed toward Arthree.

Obi-Wan shifted his attention back to the Neimoidians, still working on the mats. But even as he watched, one of them straightened up and started walking with exaggerated casualness toward one of the nearby consoles. Apparently, Anakin's drop to the floor hadn't been as secretive as they'd hoped.

He grimaced, but there was nothing for it. Pulling out his cable dispenser, he extruded a few meters and attached a grappling hook to the end, then threw the hook to catch on one of the ceiling cranes. Pulling out his lightsaber, he swung down toward the Neimoidians below.

The one who'd been heading toward the line of consoles gave a throaty yelp and broke into a run. Still in midair, Obi-Wan locked his lightsaber on and hurled it ahead of the alien. It sliced through the three closest racks, sending up a spray of sparks and bringing the Neimoidian to a sudden panic halt. "Everyone stay where you are," Obi-Wan ordered as he hit the floor, stretching out with the Force to call his lightsaber back to his hand.

The command was superfluous. Aside from turning to face him, the rest of the Neimoidians were still right where they'd been standing when he'd started down from the catwalk, clustered nervously around the far end of the mat.

Which, in Obi-Wan's experience, wasn't like Neimoidians at all. They should have been running like frightened neeks, scattering toward exits, alarm buttons, or likely places to hide. Lightsaber ready, senses alert for trouble, he started toward them. He reached the edge of the mat, noting an odd sense of anticipation in the air, and started to take another step.

And without warning, the mat's upper surface suddenly split open along its diagonals and 100 small objects burst out.

He wrenched his foot back from its intended landing spot, shoving hard off the floor with his other foot to leap half a meter backward as a group of flying disks spun around in formation and shot through the air straight at him. His

lightsaber slashed, slicing across them -- with a multiple concussion, they exploded into a blistering rain of shrapnel.

His Jedi reflexes were all that saved him, sending him ducking away so that the flying bits of metal perforated a fiery path across his shoulder and back instead of his face and throat. Suppressing the pain, he twisted back around to find another group of the disks spinning toward him. Catching them in a Force grip, he threw them hard toward the far end of the building.

There was a warning flicker from the Force, and he looked down to find a dozen small rectangular droids skittering toward him on tiny legs. He slashed with his lightsaber, dodging around out of their reach as he winced in anticipation of more explosions. But there were no blasts from this type. Instead, pools of evil-looking green liquid spurted from each as he cut it open, and the room began to fill with the hissing and pungent fumes of acid as it ate its way into the permacrete and metal of the floor.

"Watch out!" Anakin's voice shouted from behind him.

He looked up from the acid droids to find a double squadron of small spheres with short glider wings shooting toward him. Ducking to the side, he threw himself into a flat roll that brought him up onto one knee. The spheres changed course back toward him, and he slashed into the first with his lightsaber.

Obi-Wan gasped as the droid burst into a brilliant electrical discharge and sent a flash of current arcing into his arms and down his side, spasming his muscles and enveloping him briefly in a coronal haze. The other spheres were still coming; clenching his teeth, trying desperately to unknot his muscles, he swung his lightsaber up to meet them.

Even as Obi-Wan realized that he would never make it in time, there was a shout from behind him and Anakin leaped to the attack, his own lightsaber slashing back and forth among the spheres as he soared through their midst. By the time his feet hit the deck again, half the spheres were smoking pieces of rubble scattered on the deck. Ducking beneath the rest of them, Anakin stretched out his hand and sent them tumbling away.

"Thanks," Obi-Wan managed, fighting to unknot his muscles.

"No problem," Anakin said, pointing across the room. The Neimoidians were finally on the run, charging for all they were worth toward the exits. "Do we care if our friends leave?"

"No, let them go," Obi-Wan puffed, his knees shaking with the aftermath of the electrical attack. "You got the tech data download, didn't you?"

"Arthree's pulling it out now," Anakin assured him, nodding toward one of the corners of the room. "Looks like our other friends are regrouping."

Obi-Wan turned in that direction. The disk-shaped explosive droids he'd scattered earlier had gathered together in the corner, hovering in loose formation as if deciding how exactly to structure their next attack. "So are your shockers," he said, nodding to another corner where the winged spheres Anakin had dispersed had also congregated. The worker droids, he noted peripherally, had retreated to the ventilation corridor behind the rows of consoles, clearly wanting no part of this. "Looks like they're planning something."

"They're way too small to have that kind of intelligence," Anakin argued. "There must be someone or something else controlling them."

"Probably something in the mat itself," Obi-Wan suggested. "I thought I saw a glint of wires as it opened."

"Well, whatever's running them, let's get rid of them," Anakin said. "Uh-oh...."

"What?" Obi-Wan asked, stretching out toward the disks with the Force. To his surprise and consternation, he couldn't seem to get a good grip on any of them.

"They're vibrating," Anakin said. "Variable frequency, variable intensity. They're not going to be easy to -- watch out!"

Obi-Wan dropped his gaze, his lightsaber swinging downward in his hands at the urgent prompting of the Force. Just in time, too; with his attention distracted by the hovering droids across the room, a half dozen of the acid droids had managed to sneak up on him. Even as the tip of his lightsaber blade sliced into the permacrete floor, the droid in the lead spat a narrow stream of green liquid at his torso. It hit the lightsaber blade and bounced back in a fan-

shaped spray that washed over three of the others, sending them scurrying away in a flurry of hissing and burning outer shells.

Before any of the others could react, Anakin stretched out with the Force and flipped them over onto their backs, swiveling them to point their sprayers in a safe direction. "Cute," the younger man grunted as their short legs flailed around.

"That's okay," Obi-Wan told him grimly. "We can be cute, too. You think you can get a grip on one of those exploding disks for me?"

Anakin frowned in concentration. "Let me see...yes, got it."

"Then get ready," Obi-Wan told him. Getting one of the acid droids in a Force grip, he hurled it across the room toward the flying spheres.

It took the control system perhaps half a second to catch on -- but that half-second was all it had. Even as the flying spheres broke formation and started to disperse, Anakin yanked his explosive droid out of the disk formation and hurled it on a collision course with Obi-Wan's acid droid.

Their paths intersected just in front of the scattering spheres, and with a flash of fire, the spheres were suddenly enveloped in a cloud of green acid. Even before the sound of the blast faded away, Obi-Wan and Anakin caught up the remaining acid droids and began hurling them like an interceptor missile spread at the remaining explosive disks.

The disks dodged frantically, but the droids were coming at them too quickly and there simply wasn't enough maneuvering space in their corner. Two more collisions, two more explosions of green smoke, and the battle was over.

"Well, that was fun," Anakin said. "You okay?"

"I think so," Obi-Wan said, eyeing the last of the smoking electrical droids as it settled unsteadily to the floor and lay still. Closing down his lightsaber, he wiggled his fingers experimentally. The numbness was nearly gone, though the shrapnel injuries across his back would require a healing trance somewhere down the road. "I'll be fine."

"Good," Anakin said. "Rule number one: Try not to be grounded when a high-voltage capacitor weapon zaps you."

"I'll try to remember that," Obi-Wan said dryly.

"Rule number two," Anakin went on, his voice suddenly tight as he held up his right hand. "Don't have an artificial hand when you do it."

A hand, Obi-Wan saw, that was visibly trembling. "Can you still fight with it?" he asked.

Anakin shrugged. "It's not too bad, but I may not be up to taking on a full garrison of battle droids." He walked over to the ripped mat, stepping carefully around the still sizzling pits in the permacrete. "Nice little booby-trap they've come up with."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, studying it carefully. There was a thin base layer of machinery inside, but aside from that the thing looked pretty light -- and waterproof, perhaps?

"Go get Arthree," he told Anakin, glancing around the room. His eyes fell on a group of three equipment racks, each of them over a meter wide and deep, and a good two meters tall, and he crossed over to it. Igniting his lightsaber, he sliced away the shelf supports, releasing the equipment boxes to crash onto the floor in a tangle of cables and power lines.

Lifting the three racks, Obi-Wan carried them back to the empty mat, laying them together on their sides in the center of the material. By the time Anakin returned with Arthree, he had the edges of the mat pulled tightly up around the sides, hooking the material in place on the mounting pins.

"This looks interesting," Anakin commented, eying the contraption. "I hope you don't think they're just going to let us float our way out of here."

"I'm hoping they'll have bigger things to worry about by then," Obi-Wan assured him, pulling out his lightsaber again and digging into the floor. "Put Arthree aboard and get ready."

He finished cutting their exit hole, letting the slab of permacrete drop into the surging river below. Together, he and Anakin lifted the makeshift boat over the opening and let it carefully down. Anakin, he noted with silent approval, had

fastened a line to one end of the boat, which he now tethered to the upstream edge of the opening with his grapple. Gripping the edges of the hole, the two Jedi lowered themselves down.

To Obi-Wan's relief, his contraption did indeed float. "We're just going to ride the current?" Anakin shouted over the noise, squinting as the waves threw spray off the support pillars on either side.

"Yes, with a little troublemaking along the way," Obi-Wan said. Igniting his lightsaber, he slashed the blade at an angle across the nearest pillar. With a grinding thud, the top part of the column slid partially past the lower section, pulling a series of hairline cracks in the platform where the sudden dead weight now dragged at it.

"Ah," Anakin said, nodding his understanding. "Like you said, bigger things for them to worry about." He sliced through the pillar on the opposite side of the boat, then reached over and cut their anchor line.

The boat took off, bucking along the waves like a sprinting animal. The two Jedi kept busy, cutting every pillar within reach as they went. Ahead, the far edge of the platform loomed, and they shot out into the open area of the gorge to find a dozen battle droids on STAPs hovering in wait. Spotting the boat, they swiveled to face it and opened fire.

Obi-Wan stretched out with the Force, letting it guide his lightsaber as he deflected away the shots that came near. The boat passed beneath the sentry line, and he turned to keep his lightsaber between him and the droids as they spun around and gave chase. Keeping his weapon moving, deflecting the shots straight back at the STAPs wherever possible, he settled into his defense.

They'd gone perhaps another dozen meters when it suddenly penetrated his combat tunnel vision that Anakin wasn't using the standard Jedi technique of deflecting the droids' own weapons back against them. In fact, as Obi-Wan paused for a quick breather, he saw that his Padawan's deflected shots were instead going harmlessly back toward the base itself.

Was his artificial hand still malfunctioning? If so, they were about to be in serious trouble. A fresh cluster of STAPs had appeared over the base, far more than he could handle alone. "Anakin!" he shouted over the water's roar. "You're not hitting the droids!"

"I'm not aiming for the droids!" the other shouted back. "I'm aiming for that power generator at the edge of the base!"

Obi-Wan smiled tightly. He should have known. Settling back into combat mode, he started aiming his own deflected shots toward the generator.

The droid reinforcements were just clearing the edge of the base when the generator blew, throwing debris into the air and sending a concussion wave down the gorge that nearly knocked Obi-Wan out of the boat. Through the smoke, he caught a glimpse of a dozen STAPs plummeting out of control, while beneath them a broken section of the base's permacrete platform collapsed ponderously into the river.

And with their base disintegrating and their Neimoidian masters in imminent danger of drowning, the droids did indeed suddenly have bigger things to worry about than a pair of escaping Jedi. As a slight bend in the gorge cut off his view, Obi-Wan saw the surviving STAPs turn around and head back for rescue duty.

Odds were, they weren't going to be there in time.

* * *

"They're called crawl-carriers," Anakin told Kirlan and Trissa when they were once again sitting around the kitchen table. "It's an experimental weapons-delivery system designed for anticity or antibase intrusion."

"So how is it better than a normal armored carrier?" Kirlan asked.

"Mainly because it can get its package a lot closer before it's spotted," Anakin said. "They travel very slowly when they detect sensor probes or nearby observers, and only pick up the pace when no one's looking. Throw in some camouflage, and they can be on your doorstep before you know it."

"It's not something you'd use in the middle of a battle," Obi-Wan added. "It's a long-term weapon you'd set moving days or even weeks before you plan to attack."

"Or you'd use it without any official attack at all," Kirlan growled. "Look at what it's carrying: antipersonnel explosives, building-collapsing acids, power grid-wrecking capacitors. It strikes me more as a terror weapon."

"You could be right," Obi-Wan conceded. "We haven't really seen that sort of thing from the Separatists, but they may be starting to think in new directions."

"It seems so incredible," Trissa murmured. "You think something like this could actually work?"

"It already has," Obi-Wan told her grimly. "One of these has to be what brought down my scout ship." He looked sideways at Anakin. "Which brings us to the bad news. According to the base's records, that particular carrier is still on the loose."

Trissa caught her breath. "You mean it's in our fields?"

"Yours or someone else's," Anakin said. "The carriers are autonomous, which means that the fact that their base is gone hasn't bothered it any. If it was fully charged, it could keep going for a long time."

"But you can find it, can't you?" Trissa asked anxiously.

"We'll certainly try," Obi-Wan said. "I'll take the scout ship up first thing in the morning and do a scan. But with all its shielding and camouflage, it's going to be pretty hard to spot."

"Plus the fact that all our motion sensors are designed to locate and react to things coming in at high speed," Anakin added. "Probably why they were experimenting with something this slow in the first place."

"It has to be making for Vale City," Kirlan rumbled. "That's the only population center nearby big enough to bother with."

"I agree," Obi-Wan said. "We need to find it before it gets there." He hesitated. "And then figure out how to stop it."

"Can't you call in reinforcements?" Trissa asked.

"We can call, but they may not answer," Anakin said. "There's a lot of action going on in this sector right now, and we're spread pretty thin. Sector Command may not be able to free up anyone."

"Especially when all that's at stake is a minor city on an even more minor planet?" Kirlan asked bluntly.

Obi-Wan grimaced but nodded. "Yes."

Kirlan nodded back. "Thanks for being honest. Okay, then. Can you destroy it?"

"I don't know," Obi-Wan had to admit. "They're programmed for threat analysis and response, which is why the one at the base opened when I approached it. Out there, with more potential targets than just me, the droids may very well scatter before Anakin and I can deal with all of them. We need a way to destroy the whole thing at once before that can happen."

"I have a question," Trissa said. "What happens if you attack it and don't destroy it, but it hasn't reached Vale yet?"

"Then it'll attack whatever it can find," Obi-Wan said quietly. "That means one or more of the homesteads."

"And they'll kill everyone there," Trissa murmured.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes." He paused, waiting for the inevitable accusations and recriminations because, ultimately, all of this was his fault. If he hadn't been flying low enough for the crawl-carrier to pick him off, or if he and Anakin had simply left with the rest of the survey team early this morning, none of this would be happening.

But to his mild surprise, the inevitable didn't happen. Kirlan and Trissa looked at each other with that silent communication he'd seen before in people who were very close; and with a microscopic nod from each, they turned to the two Jedi. "Then I guess we'll have to make sure that doesn't happen," Kirlan said firmly, getting to his feet. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Obi-Wan asked as the other led the way out of the kitchen and down the hall. Kirlan didn't answer but merely walked to the living room and gestured inside. Obi-Wan stepped through the entryway and

blinked. Sitting quietly on the chairs and couches were most of the same friends and neighbors Kirlan and Trissa had assembled the first night he'd been here. "I wondered who all the other people were," Anakin murmured from behind him.

"I didn't even notice," Obi-Wan confessed, studying their faces. The last time he'd faced this group, their predominant emotions had been fear and antagonism. The fear was still there, but now it was colored with determination and support. "What's going on?"

"I should think that was obvious," Hanco said. The same man, Obi-Wan remembered, who a few days ago had flatly accused him of bringing the war to Dagro. "Kirlan said you might need some help. That's us."

"I see," Obi-Wan said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but what changed your minds?"

Hanco grinned tightly. "You did," he said. "Kirlan gave you about the lowest job we've got, stripping crop stubble. And you did it. Not only that, but you did it without complaining." He raised his chin a little. "That makes you okay in my book."

"And besides," Kirlan added, "like you said, the war's already here. I guess it's time we did our part."

Anakin cleared his throat. "No disrespect or anything, but I'm not sure you're really equipped for this sort of fight."

"Whether we are or not, we can at least help with the first part of your problem," Kirlan said. "That crawl-carrier may be invisible to city folks who don't get out in the real world more than once a year, but it hasn't got a chance of hiding from people who know our fields as well as we do."

"And as to the rest of it, you might be surprised," Hanco said calmly. "Come on in and sit down. We've got some serious strategizing to do."

By the time the meeting broke up three hours later, they had the beginnings of a workable plan.

Two days later, when one of Hanco's daughters finally spotted the crawl-carrier, they were ready to move.

* * *

"There," Obi-Wan said, pointing out the harvester's cab at a section of stubble where a sargheet field had recently been harvested. "A little north of the center."

Beside him at the harvester's controls, Kirlan shook his head. "I'll take your word for it," he said. "I still can't see the blasted thing."

"Frankly, neither can I," Obi-Wan admitted, shifting his gaze to his right. Hanco's harvester was paralleling them a few meters away with Hanco hunched determinedly over the controls. Beyond it, Obi-Wan could see the tops of Hanco's house and barn, well within range of the carrier's attack droids if this didn't work. Probably one reason for the man's grim expression. "But Hanco's sure. That's good enough for me."

"Obi-Wan?" Anakin's voice came from his comlink. "We're ready."

"So are we," Obi-Wan confirmed. "Let's do it."

"Right."

Slipping the comlink back into his belt, Obi-Wan opened the side door of the cab. "Be sure to stay to the right, on the carrier's eastern edge," he reminded Kirlan. "And whatever you do, don't even look like you're going to run over it." "Got it," Kirlan said, his voice tight. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Catching the edge of the doorframe, Obi-Wan swung himself out onto the top step. He shifted grip, turned, and climbed the rest of the way up onto the pile of crop stubble bulging over the side walls of the harvester's wide grain bin. He crossed to the left-hand side, wincing at the stubble's scratchiness as he waded through it. Ahead and to the left, rumbling southbound toward them on the other side of the harvested field, were two more harvesters with Pickers and Jurvi at their controls. Perched on the heaped stubble atop the nearest one -- Jurvi's -- was Anakin.

The four harvesters were nearing the camouflaged carrier now, Kirlan's and Hanco's on the eastern edge, the other two aiming to pass just to the west of it, and Obi-Wan found himself holding his breath. According to the base's records, the carrier had been out here a week and a half, and in that time it must surely have seen passing harvesters and concluded they weren't a threat.

The question was whether seeing four of them together would be perceived as somewhat less innocent. Obi-Wan could make out the carrier now, looking for all the world like a slightly raised section of harvested sargheet field. Gazing across its artificial stubble, he saw Anakin lean toward his harvester's cab window and say something, and Jurvi made a slight adjustment in their direction.

Still no reaction from the carrier. Reaching to his belt, Obi-Wan got a grip on his lightsaber and braced himself.

Right on cue, with the carrier barely five meters ahead, Pickers suddenly slowed his harvester, letting Jurvi's roll past it, then made a hard left turn to cut across in front of the crawl-carrier's northern edge. At the same time, Jurvi pushed his throttle to full speed, and Obi-Wan had to grab for a handhold as Kirlan did likewise with his harvester. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Hanco pull a mirror image of Pickers' maneuver, cutting behind Kirlan's harvester to run alongside the crawl-carrier's southern edge. With a precision that would have done a drill team proud, the harvesters braked to a stop, neatly surrounding the carrier on all four sides.

Even before they came to a halt, Obi-Wan had leaped down from the bin, landing beside Kirlan's harvester. Igniting his lightsaber, he made two quick slashes, slicing through the latches on the side of the bin.

And as he stretched to the Force and jumped sideways and backward out of the way, the side wall of the bin burst open, releasing the load of gravel that had been concealed beneath the camouflaging layer of crop stubble. His leap landed him beside Hanco's harvester; and as the roar of flowing rock filled the air, he slashed again, opening up Hanco's bin and adding its load of gravel to the flow. Leaping straight up out of the way, he caught the side of the bin and pulled himself up onto the cab, turning around to look.

It was an even more impressive sight than he'd expected. Already the gravel pouring in from four directions had covered most of the crawl-carrier with only

a small area in the center still visible. Lifting his lightsaber, he watched the clear area closely, wondering if the carrier would have time to spring at least a couple of its attack droids.

But it didn't. The last bit of the war machine vanished beneath the gravel, and the pile grew deeper, until finally the roaring subsided and only the idling of the harvesters' engines remained.

"Everything's set," Obi-Wan said, climbing out of Anakin's starfighter and stepping over to where the Swens family waited. "An analysis team will be here tomorrow. They'll dig out the crawl-carrier and take it with them for study."

"Good luck to them," Kirlan said doubtfully. "The thing's pretty well flattened."

"These teams are used to looking at stuff that's crashed or been blown up," Anakin pointed out dryly. "Trust me; this'll be a walk in the park. What did General Bavis say about the bounty?"

"That's set, too," Obi-Wan confirmed.

"Bounty?" Trissa asked, frowning.

"There's a reward for discovering and turning in new Separatist equipment," Obi-Wan explained. "It should be more than enough to cover all the harvester catches Anakin and I wrecked, plus hauling the gravel back out of Hanco's field, plus hopefully enough left over to pay all of you back for the time you took off from your work schedules."

"Are you leaving us?" Zizzy asked, a note of protest in her voice.

"Yeah, can't you stay awhile?" Kit seconded.

"I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said, looking at the children. "Maybe someday we can come back. Right now, though, we have a war to fight." He looked back at Kirlan and Trissa. "And with luck," he added, "that task will keep all of us a long way from your world."

"We can hope so," Kirlan said, stretching out his hand to grip Obi-Wan's. "But if the war does come back to Dagro, you know who to call."

"We will," Obi-Wan said. "May the Force be with you."

"And may the Jedi be with us," Trissa added. "Always."

Medstar : Intermezzo

Jos pried a shard of sharp and jagged durasteel half as wide as his hand from the belly of the wounded trooper and dropped it into the tray Tolk was holding out. It didn't clank when it hit-somebody had gotten tired of hearing that particular noise over and over again, and had lined the metal trays with old sheets of thick and rubbery transponder insulation. Novy, when a surgeon pulled shrapnel from a patient and dropped it in the dish, the sound was muffled, a soft thump of little consequence.

Not a bad idea, Jos thought. Of course, the new sound irritated him just as much as the old one had. More, maybe. But then, a lot of things irritated Jos these days. Having to stand there for hours on end and pull chunks of razored metal from charred and scrambled organs was high on that list. It made padding surgical trays to soften the clatter seem fairly pointless.

You sure you want to go there, Jos? his inner voice asked. You sure you want to think about the pointlessness of things?

No. He didn't.

Like it made much of a difference what he wanted.

The air coolers were offline again, due to spore-rot; nothing unusual there. The damp tropical heat seeped into the OT, turning the air sodden, raising sweat and not allowing it to evaporate. The smell of mold was omnipresent, easily overwhelming the ozone tang of the antiseptis fields as well as the more unpleasant chemical scent of the herbicide they periodically coated on the walls. The spore infestation had been particularly bad since the move from the Jasserak lowlands to the highlands, Everyone was wearing microfilter masks and protective goggles, whether outside or inside, it wasn't paranoia; three humans, a Kubaz, and an Ugnaught were in the infirmary right now being treated for ascomycetous pneumocontosis. Jos had seen sentients of those species, and others as well, suffering from end-stage fester lung as it

was commonly known. It wasn't pretty. Some spiked fevers high enough to literally cook in their own juices.

And the highland area was considered one of the garden spots of the planet.

Jos clamped off a couple of small bleeders and had Tolk sponge the wound. He looked at it with a critical eye. Good enough. The droid could gluestatthis one shut, and if the clone trooper didn't get fester lung, spleen-rot, or some other kind of infection from the blasted spots in the next 24 hours, he'd probably survive to fight another day.

"Give him to the droid to close," Jos told Tolk. He sighed. "And tell our next guest his table's ready."

The operating theater was makeshift, even more so than usual, since it had only just been set up. Rimsoos were designed to relocate in a hurry-hence the "mobile" in Republic Mobile Surgical Unit-but they'd only pulled up stakes and moved once since Jos had been on this overcooked world, and that had been less than a week ago. It had seemed the prudent thing to do, given that the Separatists were mounting a major offensive to push the Republic front lines back, tossing mortars, zapping them with lasers and particle beams, and generally blowing the mopek out of the place. The relocation had gone by the book, according to the official report, with a minimum loss of equipment, patients, and personnel.

Of course, one of the casualties had happened to be Jos' closest friend,

Jos blew out. another sigh. It had been almost fifteen minutes' since he'd thought about Zan. Must be a new record.

Zan Yant, a Zabrak from the world of Talus, had been a surgeon and an accomplished musician as well as Jos' cube-mate, and a more sympatico soul one could not have asked for. Now Zan was dead-collateral damage in a war that he'd hated, with a passion that seemed reserved for those of artistic temperament. Zan Yant, scion of a wealthy mercantile family, a corn-' poser of classical Etudes, sonatas, consertistas, and other works of musical genius, was dead, and there was no sense to it. no purpose, and no excuse.

He hadn't suffered; there was that consolation, at least. A sliver of shrapnel, thinner than a bantha hair, had lodged in the Zabrak's anterior ganglion node, at the base of his skull, shutting him down instantly. It had been-so everyone said-anal-gous to flicking off the master switch on the back of a protocol droid's neck. That quick and painless.

The crucial difference being, of course, that one could always power up a droid again.

A pair of clone troopers, pressed into service as orderlies, wheeled in the next patient. This kind of scut work should have been done by programmed droids but some kind of rust or smut had attacked the seals on many of the mechanicals, and as-a result, more than half of them were out of service.

It was an insane situation. He was the Chief Surgeon, after all, and a Captain, the second in command after Colonel D'Arc Vaetes. He wasn't supposed to be elbow-deep in the purplish guts of clone troopers, pulling out scrap metal and staunching bleeders. But the conditions on this world had set the clock back a few millennia, and they now worked shorthanded, under primitive conditions that all too often meted out death instead of renewed life for whoever was under their laser scalpels.

Tolk la Trene, his scrub nurse, looked at the flatscreen report on the next injured clone. "Particle burns, compression injuries, according to the field medic." She rattled off the blood pressure, respiration, and heart rate as Jos nodded absently. All he wanted to do was crawl into his kiosk and sleep-for a week, a month, however long it took for this blasted war to be over. It was too much effort to think, to remember, to even breathe, much less to do surgery. But there was no choice.

"Get him on fluids," he told the other nurse. He turned to Tolk. "How long can we keep him in the bacta tank?"

"Forty-five minutes, tops,"

It wasn't enough, Jos knew. And partial treatment of the bullae and necrotic tissue could be worse than no immersion, since it would raise the risk of infection. "Prep him for maser deoriding." And wave a few charms over him and chant, while you're at it

He was so tired and depressed that even the presence of his beloved Tolk, normally more than enough to raise his spirits under the most adverse conditions, failed to cheer him now/

They'd only recently reconciled their differences in the wake of Zan's death, and he felt he should be the happiest lifeform in the galaxy. Instead, he felt a welter of conflicting emotions, not the least of which was guilt for being alive and in love.

He knew he had to go through this. Grief was a process that couldn't be rushed or refused. And Tolk understood. In addition to being a nurse, she was also a Lorradian; her ability to read the body language of others bordered on telepathy. She knew he needed space-more than anything else right now.

Behind him, shrouded inside a hooded and concealing robe, stood one of The Silent, that mysterious siblinghood whose very presence somehow seemed to help patients recuperate. No one understood if the effect was panacea or placebo, but no one could deny it was real.

Whatever you're using on them, Jos thought, save a little forme.

They'd finally gotten some semblance of a cantina up again, and Den Dhur, ace HoloNet reporter, had been second in line when the doors had opened. He would have been first, but, being a Suliustan, his short height and weight had kept him from bulling past the larger Bothan ahead of him.

Fortunately, Bothans tended to drink the simple stuff, bottled ales and the like, so Baloob, the Ortolan tender, would get to him fast enough. That first drink was the important one; you needed to get that one down fast.

Den saw Doc Vondar a few places behind him, which wasn't exactly a surprise. The cantina had been Jos' second home of late; if he wasn't in the OT pumping fluids into some patient, he was at a table in the dimly lit pub pumping fluids into himself. And who could blame him? His best buddy, the ZabraK surgeon Zan Yant, was only a few days gone. Den wasn't human, but emotions such as grief and loss were pretty much universal. You couldn't be sentient and not feel them.

"Bantha Blaster, right?" the Ortolan asked. He wiped his sweating blue forehead with a bar towel gripped in his stubby trunk.

"Absolutely. And soon as you can see my face through the glass, set up another one."

"No problem. Don't want to have to look at your face any more than necessary," Balooob said. He started building the drink as Den headed for a small and still empty table. He beckoned to Jos on the way.

"Hey, Doc. Over here."

Jos looked at Den as if he had never seen him before but he turned and started toward him. He moved like an undead creature in a horror holo.

Poor human. This was his first war, and Zan Yant had been the first real friend he'd lost to it. Den realized with something of a shock that he couldn't even remember back to his first war and the first friend he'd seen killed-they all just blurred together into one long sense-memory of blood and chaos.

A droid server walked past. Den waved at it, got its attention. "Tell Big Nose to make another Blaster for my friend." He nodded at the approaching Jos.

"Certainly, sir," the droid said, and headed for the bar.

Den settled back and sipped his drink. He wasn't a doctor, but he knew what to prescribe in this particular case.

Barriss Offee walked into the cantina. She didn't really want a ' drink, and, as a Jedi Padawan, she wasn't supposed to imbibe anyway, it wasn't an interdiction, but the Council did frown on the younger members of the order getting soused. Barriss had ignored that guideline a few times; the last time had been a week ago, when Zan Yant had been killed. She'd had several mugs of ale, more to commiserate with Jos, Den, and the others than to help her cope with the tragedy. The Force was always there with her to aid her in dealing with such things.

She was also tired from her rotation in the medical ward, and sometimes being around other people helped her wind down a bit. While her training as a potential Jedi Knight gave her reserves that most beings were denied access to,

still, taking care of the wounded and the dying for a full shift was exhausting, even with the Force's help.

Barriss still wondered why Master Luminara Unduli had sent her here to Drongar, The galaxy needed Jedi Knights far more than doctors in the series of galactic struggles that had come to be known as the Clone Wars. Even though she wasn't technically a knight, having yet to complete her training, still she could not help but feel that her talents were being wasted here. After all, had she not helped defeat Dooku's forces in the arena on Geonosis? Had she not fought side-by-side with the legendary Kenobi and Skywalker on Ansion, and been instrumental in brokering a peace treaty there? Try as she might to accept her Master's decision with humility and grace, and as ennobling as the work of healing was, she still sometimes chafed under the yoke of her assignment here.

She saw the reporter Den Dhur and Captain Vondar sitting together, saw the little Sullustan wave at her. She smiled in response.

"Good evening, Jedi Of fee," came a voice from behind her.

She turned to see protocol droid I-5YQ entering the cantina behind her.

"I-Five. How are you?" It seemed strange to be asking a droid about its health, but then, i-Five was a singular droid on many levels. Most folk found it difficult, after more than a few minutes of conversation, to think of the unit as an "it"; the proper pronoun I-Five's case was definitely "he". The personality contained within that positronic brain was far too individual to be sexless.

"No substantial changes to report," he told her. "I'm still working on completing my memory restoration."

"Any progress?"

He gave a remarkably human-like shrug. "Nothing to narrow-cast home about. I was hoping to discover that I'm the deposed ruler of M4-78, but so far, no such luck."

Barriss smiled. M4-78 was the legendary planet of droids, supposedly dating back from the Old Republic. I-Five's sense of humor-just the fact that a droid could have a sense of humor-still surprised her at times.

She gestured at the table. "Care to join us?"

Anybody seen Klo lately?" Den asked the table at large. Normally they would be playing sabacc, but everybody was too tired to concentrate.

Tolk walked up in time to hear the question. "He's swamped," she said. "Got a lot of unhappy and distressed patients."

"Imagine that," Jos said, being careful not to slur his words. He'd followed the Blaster with a couple of Coruscant Coolers, and was fairly drunk but didn't want to let on how far down that road he was. He noticed Den looking at him. "What?" he asked, and was surprised at how querulous he sounded.

"Have you talked to him yet?"

"Who?" Den mimicked, not unkindly. "Merit. Klo Merit, Big guy, Equani, remember? Our resident Minder, the guy who patches up psyches tike you patch up bodies?"

"Me?" Jos said. "No." He shook his head, "No." He noticed the expression on Tolk's face and knew what she wanted to say, because she had said it three or four times already: Go see the empath. Let him help you with this. That's his job, that's what he does.

But he didn't want help with it. True, it hurt but it should hurt. That's why he'd refused Barriss' offer to grant him balm through the Force as well. His friend was dead, and that wasn't something a man could or should just shrug off and leave behind.

It wasn't like his death even made much sense. Zan had died for a plant The Republic clone army was here on Drongar fighting a war against the Separatist droid forces for one reason only: bota--a rare plant that could be turned into a panacean drug that was many things to many species, it could be used variously as an antibiotic, an antipyretic, a narcotic, or a soporific, depending on the life form being treated. The list was long, and it kept growing longer the more the Republic scientists experimented with various permutations of it. It seemed to have few, if any, side effects. It was truly a miracle drug; yet bota's cellular structure was so fragile that any vibration

heavier than the treads on a harvester droid could kill it. That usually kept the warring factions from throwing anything that made too big a boom at each other-but not always.

Bota grew wild in the swamps of the southern continent of Tanlassa, and both the Republic and the Separatists wanted as much of it as they could get. it had no specific benefits for mechanicals, but Count Dooku's forces weren't all droids; there were plenty of biological beings who could use what the plant provided.

The ultimate irony was that its seemingly endless list of miracle cures was interdicted for use on Drongar. Jos and the other doctors were forbidden to use bota to help the very troops who fought to protect it; it was conserved for use in more important battles on other worlds. Zan had fought against this, had gone so far as to illegally treat various patients with a distillate of it. A pity that what had laid him low had been one of the few things the phenomenal plant couldn't cure.

Jos' reverie was interrupted by an all-too-familiar sound, rising in the distance. He looked up and saw that the others were hearing it as well. The drone penetrated the noisy cantina, a sound that everybody knew and everybody hated: medlifters.

"Showtime," Jos said as he finished his drink.

He headed out of the cantina, pulling on a filter mask as the sweltering air of the Drongaran midday wrapped around him like a rontu's tongue. Barriss and Tolk followed. He noticed Leemoth and a few other surgeons approaching from their kiosks. Everyone's path converged on the landing platform, which also served as the triage area. The first of the carriers was settling in, its repulsorlift beams kicking up dust and spores, and Jos could see already that it was going to be a bad one.

Colonel Vaetes grabbed Jos as he was gowning and gloving up. "Table six is yours," he said. "And you better hurry."

Jos didn't question his boss. After all, it didn't matter. Cut, glue, staple, stitch, one clone was the same as the next. It didn't mean anything, yea or nay-sewn one, sewn them all.

But when he reached the table and looked at the patient, he got a rush so cold it felt as if he'd been dipped in cryo.

Zan!

Then, as he drew nearer, he realized his mistake. Yes, the patient was a Zabrak male, but the tattoos were different, the horn growth same pattern. It was an easy mistake to make, given his lately.

His rush of excitement plunged. Of course it wasn't Zan. He had seen Zahn's body. Dead was forever.

Tolk was laying out instruments, and the circulating nurse was setting up tractor and pressor generators and sterile field lamps as he stepped up. "I didn't know we had any more Zabraks dirtside," he said.

"We don't," Tolk said. "He's a Separatist mercenary. Got shot down behind our lines."

He hadn't had occasion to work on any since Zan's death, however. A quick surge of anger washed over him. "Let somebody else do this one," he said.

Vaetes once again zeroed in on Jos. "No can do. You're the expert on Zabrak anatomy, Jos. MagnoRez scan shows a small-arms slug against his CNS sub-sternal plex. a fragment of another in his twelfth circumcollar nerve, and a few other bits of metal here and there. We've got him on imobilin,"

"Great," Jos said, remembering his days working as a surgical resident at Big Zoo. He'd had a run on Zabrak patients, after a visiting contingent's transport had crashed. He'd assisted on more than forty surgeries in five days, "it'll be tricky. We jiggle the plex even a little, he goes into systemic shock and dies. Distress CG-12, he lives, but he's meat from the neck down." That was why they were running imobilin, a paralytic, through him; any movements, however small, could be disastrous.

As he spoke, Jos heard the sound of another medlifter dopplering in.

"Then best you get started," Vaetes said in reply. "We'll be needing the table. Soon."

"Colonel-" Jos began.

"I know. He's an enemy combatant and you aren't too fond of them right now. But he's also a high-ranking officer, and RI wants him alive and talking."

"Republic Intelligence-an oxymoron if ever there was one-is not my worry."

"No, but surgery is. He's your patient-take care of him, Doctor Vondar."

Maker's eyes, Jos thought. He stepped into the sterile field, blinking as the antipathogen lights strobed over him. "Scan?"

Tolk nodded at the circulating nurse, who held up the flatscreen with the image of the wounded Zabrak's anatomy on it.

Those drinks were coming back to haunt Jos. It was too late now for a shot of anti-hangover juice. Even sober, relaxed, and rested this sort of thing was tricky neurosurgery, and he was half drunk, tense, and exhausted. He wouldn't bet a decider against title to a luxury star cruiser on this guy's chances of surviving.

"A human?" came a deep and guttural voice. "They couldn't find a real doctor?"

The Zabrak was apparently still awake.

"Who's doing anesthesia?" Jos asked. "Why is this patient talking?"

"Haven't even started slicing me and already you've fouled up, eh, human? Big surprise, that one."

Jos ground enamel. "Somebody put this patient to sleep, please. Now."

"What's the matter?" the Zabrak asked. "Don't have the nodes to kill me while I look you in the eye?"

Jos glared at the wounded patient, "You think it's a bright idea to piss off the surgeon who's about to carve you open like a Feast Day trikaloo?"

The Zabrak sneered. A lot of people might not have recognized the expression, but Jos had lived with Zan for months, and he knew. "Go ahead and cut something fatal, human. You'll be doing me a favor. If I make it, your brain-benders will squeeze me like a sea sponge for what I know. Quick death or slow torture-which would you choose?"

"We don't torture prisoners."

The Zabrak laughed, it hurt him to do so, Jos could tell. Good, he thought, and was surprised at the fierce pleasure he felt. . "Don't get out much, do you?" the Zabrak asked.

Jos concentrated on his breathing. Don't let him get to you.

"What is your name, Zabrak?"

"What do you care, human?"

"Just curious. After all, I'm going to be cutting you open in a few minutes. I'm Doctor Jos Vondar, by the way."

"Planning to read my epitaph?"

Jos couldn't help it. "Maybe, if I'm lucky."

The Zabrak managed another laugh, again at some cost. "Sar Omant," he said. "Actually, that's Colonel Sar Omant, of the Freelance Mercenary Corps. At your service-unfortunately."

The anesthetist showed up at last and slapped a dermpatch on Colonel Omant's neck. "Sorry, Doctor Vondar," she said. "I had to find enough sodium phyleol for his weight."

Jos nodded. Of course, A Zabrak's physiology required a special anesthetic. Wouldn't be a lot of it lying around.

The Zabrak's eyes started to roll back, showing the whites. Before he lost consciousness, he managed a few more words: "loz noy jitat..."

Tolk asked, "What was that? A prayer?"

Jos gritted his teeth again. "No. A curse."

Going in, Jos realized that he was going to have to do the surgery in two parts. The CC-12 was the easier of the two procedures, insofar that it would only take an hour at most to pull it off. The sub-sternal plex could wait-it wouldn't kill the Zabrak as long as he was immobilized. Jos could dig the first fragment out. and, if he didn't further damage the circumcollar nerve, the patient would be able to walk-assuming he didn't die during the second procedure.

It would be so easy to mess it up. Even the best blademaster at Coruscant Medical might not be able to remove a thumb-tip-sized projectile from an area as sensitive as a Zabrak's plex without putting the patient into systemic shock. Nobody would be able to point a finger at Jos if Sar Omant didn't make it. Just give it a little jerk when you pull it out, twitch it just a hair....

Or he could insult the CC-12 a little and paralyze the bastard. Save his life but leave him a quad-it was tempting, very tempting, After ail, Zan was dead because of killers like this one. Omant would have plenty of time to think about his actions that way. And at least there would be some justice.

"Number eighteen vibroblade, please."

She slapped the scalpel's handle into his gloved hand. As she did so. the lights blinked off and then back on,

"What?" Jos said, as he pulled his hand away from the patient's horned breastplate.

"It's the generator," somebody said. "Spore-rot eating the harmonic plates, probably."

Is anyone really surprised? Jos wondered. They'd had to get the OT and environs up and running before all the generators were in place, and consequently everything was constantly on the verge of overload. Including the personnel-especially the personnel.

The anesthetist said to him, "We're getting some tamponade in the secondary pericardium, doctor. MEG shows a fluid buildup in the sub-heart."

Blast! Jos thought. "We'll have to drain that before we pull the slug." Zabraks had two hearts, a primary and a secondary, and if one began beating out of sync with the other, the arrhythmia could cause both to begin fibrillating. And that would most, likely kill! Omant before the plex shock got a chance to.

"Crack open a cardiac tray," Jos said. As folk turned to get one, he looked around the large room. All the operating tables were full. He could see droid orderlies, including I-Five, pushing more gurneys past the OT's clear denses doors in the hall. And even as he realized with a sinking heart how far behind they were dropping, he heard the rising whine of more medlifters approaching.

This was taking far too long. How many of the clones would die while he was working on this enemy soldier?

Den Dhur had remained in the cantina after the others had left. Mama Dhur hadn't raised no crazy younglings, and crazy was what you had to be to go out into the blazing miasmic afternoon sun if you didn't have to. So Den's plan for the rest of the day was a simple one-he would do his best to single-throatedly keep the cantina in business.

The whirl of a servodriver near the rear of the building made him glance around. A construction droid was putting the finishing touches on one of the rear panels. The OT was up and running, Den knew, plus whatever support infrastructure it needed-and the cantina, of course. But the rest of the base was only now after nearly a week, coming online. He was grateful that the cantina had been the next to be erected, after the Rimsoo buildings. Someone had their priorities straight.

Even so, however, Den-and others he'd talked to-still felt a definite sense of hanging fire. As if they were all waiting for someone or something to give them the go-ahead with the rest of their lives, or at least the rest of their tours on Drongar. There was a musical term Zan had used a lot-Den frowned, searching for the word. Intermezzo. A short and simple piece, bridging two separate works. Though often disparaged as little more than "lift-tube music," it could sometimes be, according to the Zabrak composer, extremely

important. "Like connective tissue," he'd told Den. "It holds everything else in place."

He looked about at the rest of the patrons. There were seven or eight other beings who were mostly human, but not all. The Bothan who'd crowded ahead of him earlier was still here, staring broodingly into his mug. Closer to the entrance an Ishi Tib seemed to be flirting with an Ugnaught. Den shuddered slightly. Yar, bloodline, there's a match be made on Planet Hell. He looked hastily someplace else, and spotted a Durosian medtech just entering. Something about her made Den's story sense tingle. He picked up his drink and went to join her at the bar.

He gestured to the tender. Whatever she wants. The medtech nodded her gratitude, and Den waved it away. "Just tell me something of interest. I've got this insatiable beast called the HoioNet News Service to appease."

"Not much to tell," the Durosian said. "Busy. Tables full, halls full, stacking 'em up outside."

"Old news, darlin'. Give me something juicy I can twirl a story out of."

"Well, there is one thing. Vondar is cutting on an enemy mercenary."

Den's ears swiveled forward. "Yeah?"

The Durosian lowered her voice, "And I don't think anybody's told him that his patient is the same guy who led the charge on our last camp-the one that killed Doctor Yant."

Den blinked. "Milk me with a turbo-laser. Hey, tell Big Nose your' next three drinks are on me." He got up and moved back to his own table, turning this datum over and looking at it from all sides.

It was gossip, not news-but it was a pretty amazing piece of gossip. He wouldn't want to be the patient under Doc Vondar's vibro-blade when Jos found out he was operating on the very being responsible for the death of Zan Yant. The Seppie stood a better chance shaving a Wookiee, blindfolded and with a dui! blade.

Barriss wiped sweat from her face. Her robe was of an osmotic material, with a weave that allowed air circulation better than most clothing. It could be wrapped tighter for warmth in the winter, looser for more coolness in the summer, but when the temperature in the shade was hotter than a human's body, even being naked wasn't going to stop you from perspiring. You just had to put up with it.

As she walked through the medical ward, checking on various patients, she felt a disturbance in the Force. This in itself was hardly unusual-in a room full of wounded and dying people, the swirls of energy were often erratic and labile. Impending death and chronic pain tended to heighten emotions, and such feelings marked the Force with their creation and passage.

But this was different. It was hard to pin down, but it seemed to be more familiar than some of the roiling sensations coming from the ward. When she focused on it, Barriss realized it was emanating from somebody whom she knew better than the transient patients. She narrowed her focus yet more, and suddenly she knew who it was.

Jos Vondar.

Again, this wasn't unusual, not since Zan Yant's passing. One would think that doctors would be more inured to death than most but that was, in her experience, seldom the case. They fought against the final darkness daily-sometimes winning, sometimes losing-but when it came to friends or relatives, doctors were like everyone else. Knowing the enemy was not the same as embracing him.

Barriss frowned. Even so, something was odd here. This wasn't grief that she felt from Jos, who was only a short walk away, laboring in surgery. No, this was something else. Anger? Disgust? Something in between?

Whatever it was, he needed help. She could feel it.

Barriss moved toward the OT. Things were relatively quiet for the moment; she could take a few minutes to suss out what was causing the ripple she could still feel.

How's it coming?" Vaetes asked.

"No big surprises so far," Jos replied. Tolk mopped his forehead. Behind him, the Zabrak slept peacefully, his facial and body tattoos gleaming under the halogen lights. "I've removed the projectile shard from the CC nerve, and it looks like impulse-conduction is still working peripherally, or at least grossly. He'll be able to pull a trigger just fine again, if he makes it. But it's going to take a while to get the plex surgery done."

"Can you stabilize him?"

Jos blinked away a drop of sweat Tolk-had missed that had roiled into his left eye. "Maybe. Why?"

We have sixteen wounded who need surgery, and a couple who can't wait. If you can ice this patient and get back to him, we could use your help."

Jos shrugged. "Cryo's always a risk. I thought this guy was a big deal."

"He is, but I'm not willing to let others die in his place. Stabilize him, Jos. We need you."

Jos nodded. The colonel moved away, getting quick status reports from other tables. Jos turned to the anesthetist and said, "Put him into cryo-cycle stasis and stack him somewhere."

"How long?"

"I don't know. The max. Four hours." If, after that long, Jos wasn't finished with his other patients, Colonel Omant might get freezer burn-four hours was as long as a sentient was apt to stay stable in this setting.

As Jos was re-gloving and gowning, one of the field medics passed by in the hall, pushing another gurney. He paused in the doorway. "Hey, Doc, how'd the Zabrak scum do? Died in great pain, I hope?"

"He's in cryo-stasis," Jos said.

The medic, a Twi'Lek, shook his head, his lekku swinging with the motion. "You're a bigger man than I am, Doc. Seppie killed my friend, I guarantee my hand wouldn't be all that steady with a blade."

Jos frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't know? The Zabrak was head of the mercenary unit that led the charge on our Rimsoo. Commander of the strike force of bios and droids that was first to hit us."

The medic moved on, leaving Jos standing there in the hall, feeling like he'd just been jabbed with a full-strength force-pike. Then rage roiled up in him, black and 'fierce. His hand tore through the glove he was putting on.

Commander of the strike force of bios and droids that was first to hit us....

The Sithspawn on the table whose life he'd been trying to save had been directly responsible for Zan's death!

Barriss had no trouble finding Jos Vondar. The rage that boiled in him was a splotch of darkness in the operating theater; she could feel it, almost touch it.

As she approached, she saw Tolk emerge from the 'fresher, pulling on a clean surgical top. She moved to intercept her.

"Tolk. How's Jos doing?"

"Not so good," the nurse replied grimly. "But I guess you probably know that. He just spent two hours working on a Zabrak prisoner with some tricky conditions."

"I can see where working on a Zabrak-particularly an enemy Zabrak-might be difficult for him right now, but I'm feeling some serious rage coming from him. That can't be all of it."

"it's not. We just found out the Zabrak is the head of the mercenary unit that attacked us last week."

"I see," Barriss said. "What's the status of the patient now?"

"D'Arc ordered him iced until we can clear the backlog. As soon as things settle down, Jos is supposed to go back and finish patching him up."

Barriss nodded. "Prognosis?"

"Thirty, maybe forty percent chance of survival-with a specialist in Zabrak neurosurgery. The slightest slipup at the wrong time could kill him. Jos is no expert-plus he's exhausted and not fully sober. And in another two hours he's supposed to go back in and try to save the man who's responsible for his best friend's death."

Barris shook her head in disbelief. "Under such circumstances, if the patient dies, nobody would blame Jos."

"Of course not. But I know him, Barriss. Even if he tries his best, if Omant dies, sooner or later Jos will look in the mirror and wonder if he did it on purpose, i don't think he'd be able to live with that, ft would eat him up."

Barriss didn't say anything. This was a truly nasty situation; in fact, she couldn't think of a way it could be any worse.

"Can you help him?" Tolk asked.

She sighed. "I can try."

The medlifters finally stopped coming. Elbows-deep in a clone full of grenade fragments, Jos heard somebody say that the battle that produced the huge influx of wounded was finally over. The word was that the Separatists had lost half as many battledroids as the Republic had clones but that wasn't much consolation.

Jos looked around, spotted a circulating surgical tech, and beckoned him over. "Somebody better thaw Omant out," he told the tech, a female Ugnaught. "He's been cooling for almost the limit."

"Y'gonna have t' wake 'im up when he gets warm, y'know."

She was right. Zabraks had a weird resistance to anesthesia-only a few kinds worked well on them, and the natural hardiness of the species was such that they quickly developed resistance to those.

"Rne, wake him up-but keep the paralytic running."

"Y'got it, Doc,"

Tolk started gluestatting and stapling the last patient shut. Jos gestured at the circulating tech for new gloves and a gown. He wasn't looking forward to this.

Or was he? That was the big question, wasn't it?

Barriss had finished her shift in the medical ward, and she went straight from there to the surgical theater. As a healer and a Jedi, she had abilities other doctors didn't; she could use the Force to soothe and repair injuries not easily treated with a drug or a blade. But there were limits. One of those limits lay in treating somebody against their will, or without their knowledge. It was one thing to go into the mind of a patient in a coma; another thing to adjust the thoughts of somebody who was awake and functioning. Yes, Jedi used the Force to sway weak minds, when the only other choice was to allow those beings to do grievous harm to themselves or others. . But entering the strong mind of a surgeon working to save a dying patient was an entirely different situation.

Assuming that Jos is trying to save the Zabrak, and not kill him.

Reading that kind of intent was sometimes difficult. With all of the emotion roiling around in Jos' head, Barriss knew she could easily mistake his intent regarding Omant. He undoubtedly had mixed feelings, was seriously conflicted about it And how you felt about a thing was not always how you acted upon it.

The halls were clearing out, and there weren't any wounded lined up outside the main OT when she got there. Barriss looked into the theater. The surgeons, surgical droids, nurses, techs, and orderlies bustled about, tending to the injured. She saw Jos as he stepped up to a new patient, and the Force told her it was yet another clone trooper, and not the Zabrak officer.

Which was just as well. There was another aspect to all this that she had to consider. If she brought the Force to bear on Jos while he was in the middle of a delicate procedure, she might very well cause him to make a mistake. His was not a weak mind, and any conflict between his brain and hers could

translate to neural misfiring, and in turn to a tremulous hand wielding the blade.

Tricky. Very tricky. She wished she could talk to her Master, to get her advice. But that wasn't going to happen, either.

Jos stripped off his gloves. He was hardly able to manage that, he was so tired.

The fern Ugnought tech cycled around. "Zabrak's awake, Doc. Got a mouth on 'im, dat one does." Jos nodded wearily. "Where is he?"

"Pre-op."

Sar Ornant was lying under a thin sheet of repelfab, tracking Jos with his eyes as he was unable to turn his head. Nobody else was around. The monitoring casters stuck to the patient fed their data to a nursing station, and presumably somebody there was keeping track of the vital signs.

"Ah, Doctor Smoothskin," Ornant greeted him with. "Why am I still alive?"

"That's a good question. I'm looking for an answer/"

"Don't trouble yourself on my account."

"We fixed a heart problem, took a slug fragment out of your spinal cord, and we're getting ready to pull another slug out of your substernal plex."

"Like I said, human, don't bother. Better dead than bled from the head."

Jos said, "My best friend on this backrocket planet was a Zabrak surgeon."

"Goes to show you how tolerant of lesser species we Zabraks are, doesn't it?"

"His name was Zan Yant."

Even though Omant's facial muscles weren't working very well, Jos thought he saw a surprised expression flit across the other's features.

"You know the name." It was not a question. , "Talusian, right? Music composer, plays the queterra," Omant said. "Not a classical fan myself, but he's pretty well-known on the home-world. What about him?"

"He's dead," Jos said tonelessly. "You killed him."

Omant was watching him closely now. "Not impossible," he said. "I kill a lot of people. I don't remember dusting one of my own kind recently. Hey, you get busy, you miss things, right?"

Jos wanted to pick up something heavy and smash Ser Omant's horned head to a bloody mush. He wanted to hit him over and over again.

"It doesn't bother you?" he asked. "To kill a being of your own species?"

"It doesn't bother me to kill a being of any species, smoothie. It's what I do. It's why we're all on this hot mudball, isn't it? It's a war-haven't you noticed?"

They were alone in the chamber at the moment. Jos knew that all he had to do was put his hand on Sar Omant's shoulder, as if making a friendly, companionable gesture, and shake him. Not hard. A brief jerk or two would be all that was needed. He knew this. And he knew that Omant knew it too.

He peached out, put his hand lightly on the Zabrak's shoulder. For a long moment, both were very still. Then Jos said, "Rest up. You'll need it."

He turned and stalked out of the OT.

Jos headed for the 'fresher, his surgical scrubs soaked with sweat. As he stepped in, he nearly ran into Klo Merit. The big Equani Minder was drying his hands under a blower. He looked up and smiled. The Equani was, as Zan had once described him, as big as a Wampa with a thyroid problem. His eyes were large and stereoptican, and his mouth wide and filled with two rows of teeth. Equani were definitely predators, and Jos imagined they probably looked pretty fearsome to anyone coming upon one for the first time, knowing as he

did the gentle soul beneath the fearsome exterior, however, Jos found it hard to think of Merit as anything but a benign professional therapist.

He raised a hand in greeting. "Klo."

"Jos. How are you doing?"

"Me? Oh, fine. Relaxed, enjoying another beautiful day on scenic Drongar, fun capital of the galaxy. How's about you?"

"I just came from post-op."

Jos nodded. The Minder would have been busy, calming the spirits of those who were gravely wounded or dying. Jos didn't envy him that job. He started to strip off his sodden clothes.

Merit asked, "You done for the day?"

"Got one more surgery." Jos activated the unit. "They're prepping him now." He started disrobing, then stopped and looked at the Minder.

"You ever have to work on patients you don't like?" he asked. "Heat somebody who grates on you, someone you actively hate?"

"Now and then, yes."

"How do you handle it?"

Merit shrugged, the short fur on his shoulders and back rippling with the movement. "We all have to do things we don't enjoy. We all find ourselves in situations where our actions aren't those we'd prefer. But when you sign on to do a job, you don't always get to choose-it's the nature of the work. When you can't live with a choice, you walk away."

"What if you can't walk away?"

Merit leaned against the plasteel wall. "Care to get more specific?"

Jos stood staring into the shower. He watched the water pool on the floor and spiral down the drain. "My patient is responsible for the attack that

killed Zan."He has no regrets about it; he's a mercenary. He's also an obnoxious milking mopak I wouldn't cross the street to spit on if he was on fire-and I'm the only guy here qualified to save his life. And at best, the odds are against him, even if I don't make a mistake,"

Merit didn't speak for a moment. "That's a hard one."

Jos laughed, and the sound danced on the edge of hysteria. "Got to hand it to you Minders, you don't miss a thing."

Merit sighed. "Nobody around here has all the answers, Jos, not even our neighborhood Jedi. You want to punish this patient for what he did. You'd like to see him suffer and die."

"Oh, yeah." Jos hesitated, then added, "Just after Zan died, while we were still on the transport, I swore to myself that I would do something that would change things, somehow. I was concussed and barely conscious, couldn't even stand up, but I remember deciding that I had to avenge Zan, to make his death not quite so meaningless,"

"And now a golden opportunity has presented itself. The supreme irony-the very being who was directly responsible for Zan's death turns up under your knife. 'What are the odds? How can it be anything else but fate?' you ask yourself."

"Yes,"

Merit nodded. "Understandable. But now ask yourself this: if you'd died in that attack and it was Zan about to operate on the being responsible, what do you think he would do?"

Jos shook his head, "i don't know."

"I think you do. If you're looking for justice, Jos, finding it in a war is never going to be easy. People do things that are horrible and despicable. But if they survive, when the war is over, they have to look back on those actions and figure out a way to rationalize what they did. Ask yourself this: ten years from now, while you're in practice on your home world treating civilian patients, then going home to see your spouse and children, how will you feel

about the choice you made with this patient? If your son or daughter asks you what you did in the war, what will you tell them?"

Cleaner and slightly refreshed from his shower, Jos stood waiting as a droid orderly gurneyed the patient in and transferred him to the table. Activity had died down, there were only a couple of surgeons still slicing, but Jos was aware that those who weren't working were watching him. Barriss Offee stood a few meters away, masked and gowned, also watching.

The Zabrak was still awake. They wouldn't knock him out until the last moment, to keep him from staying under any longer than necessary. He gave Jos a baleful glare.

"Doctor Smoothskin. Longtime no see. Any messages you want me to deliver to your friend when I get to the other side?"

Jos ignored him. He turned to the anesthetist. "Knock him out," he said.

Sar Omant was laughing when the anesthetic took him down.

Vaetes drifted over. "Listen, Jos. If this guy doesn't make it, nobody will blame you. Not that I'm saying you should-"

Jos nodded. "I know what you mean, D'Arc. Thanks."

"Just do your best." Vaetes moved off.

"Doctor," the anesthetist said, "he's going into Rhees-Verk."

"Back off on the effitol drip a quarter, start an infusion of neurodan, five milligrams." Rhees-Verk breathing, a kind of syco-pated rhythm, often led to ventricular fibrillation.

After a moment, the anesthetist said, "Still laboring." Blast, Jos thought. "Let's get him on cardioresperatory, stat-"

"Wait, hold on. He's stabilizing." The anesthetist's voice was astonished. "I don't know how or why, but he's steady again."

"Let's not stop to wonder why," Jos said. "Stations, everyone. We're going in."

Barriss Offee, wrapped in the Force, was working hard to keep the injured Zabrak's breathing regulated. It took all her concentration, and if she slacked off, she knew his primary heart would start to vibrate so fast it wouldn't be able to pump blood-and the Zabrak would most likely crash before the subheart could take over. She could hold him stable, this she knew, but she couldn't spare any energy for Jos. Whatever decision he was going to make about the patient, however he was going to deal with his personal demons, he was going to have to do it without any help from the Force.

Number eighteen vibroblade," Jos said. Tolk slapped the handle into his palm. "Eighteen vibroblade."

"Making the incision-okay. Retract and get a pressor on it."

Jos paused, looking down at the patient. A small area just below the sternum was being held open by pressor fields, exposing the rosy strata of the plex. Within its folds he could glimpse the dull gray of the slug lodged there.

He looked at Sar Omant's face. Even unconscious, the Zabrak's expression was hard, unforgiving. The face of a killer.

What would Zan Yant, a kind and gentle being who had been a doctor, a musician, and a good friend, do if it were him cutting?

What was the best way for Jos to serve his friend's memory? What was the best way for him to serve his own future? What was the only way to help, however infinitesimally, begin the healing process that must eventually encompass the galaxy?

He remembered then, for some reason, listening to a piece Zan had been playing a couple of months earlier, in their kiosk. Short, and consisting mostly of one or two single, quavering notes. An intermezzo, he'd called it. A moment between movements, a held breath, a pause before plunging back into the music that was life. "What happens in these moments, these interstitial beats," he'd told Jos, "are as important as the main pieces themselves, Because it's in those moments between where we gain clarity. Where we suddenly know what the next movement is really all about."

"Forceps," he murmured to Tolk. She handed them to him, and he could see that she was smiling under her mask.

As was he.

Hammer

The hilt of the lightsaber hummed in Telloti Cillmam'n's hand as the blade hissed to life and cast the wall of inscrutable carvings in a green glow.

It wasn't Telloti's lightsaber. He would never build one of his own. And yet here was Master Ryelli, content to use his own lightsaber as a light source.

"Hold it steady," Master Ryelli directed, muffled by his breath-mask, wrinkling his balding brow as he stooped and ran a three-fingered hand across the ancient stone. Master Ryelli had lost those fingers in the Petranaki Arena on Geonosis three years ago, just as he had lost his Padawan, Lumas Etima. Telloti had known Lumas. They had been initiates together in Boma Clan as younglings at the Jedi Temple.

Although Telloti had dueled and bested Lumas and most of the other Initiates during the Apprentice Trials — before finally succumbing to Wollwi Enan, a girl from Berchest — Master Ryelli had selected Lumas as his Padawan learner. No Master had claimed Telloti. He had been transferred by the Council of Reassignment to the Explorer Corps. For seven years he had been a Pathfinder pilot in the Corps. What else could he do? He had never known any other home but the Jedi, had been taken too young to remember his parents or his home on Taanab. He had nowhere else to go. From infancy, he had been told he was special, that the Force had chosen him. But the Force had apparently changed its mind.

The war was in its fourth year. A war against a real Sith Lord, the kind Masters Piell and Nu had told him stories of as a boy. Telloti ached to join the fight. He thought maybe if he could prove himself a warrior, the Council would reconsider its decision not to train him. It wasn't unheard of. Master Kenobi had languished in the AgriCorps on Bandomeer before Qui-Gon Jinn had finally seen in him what others had missed and taken him on as his apprentice. Look at Kenobi now.

But there was little chance of that under Ekim Ryelli. After being wounded at Geonosis, after Lumas' death, Ryelli had requested this duty. He was an archaeologist, and wanted to be as far from the war as possible, digging in the dirt and scrutinizing pottery shards.

The war was close. Closer to Telloti than it had ever been. Ord Radama, where they had departed for their latest expedition, had belonged to the Separatists only last year. But he knew it was winding down. Soon his chance to prove himself would be lost. He had always thrilled to Master Piell's stories of the Jedi Knights and their clashes with the Sith. It seemed unfair to him that he should be sidestepped by history, even as it was unfolding only parsecs away.

"I don't recognize these letters," Ryelli admitted.

"Really?"

That was a surprise to Telloti. If it was old and forgotten, surely Ryelli was familiar with it.

"Can't you read them?"

"Given time," Ryelli said. He captured images of the wall with his datapad, then reached for his lightsaber. Reluctantly, Telloti handed it over. It receded into the hilt, bathing them in darkness.

"Check your light now," Ryelli suggested.

Telloti pursed his lips. He had forgotten to charge the portable torches before they'd left the ship, and had recharged his own battery with his datapad rather than turn back. He flicked the torch on, and a cone of light spilled across the floor.

"Good," said Ryelli, keying his comm. "Staguu, do you read?"

Their Givin astrogator's voice crackled over the comlink. He had remained aboard their ship on a flat area outside the structure.

"Everything all right, Master?"

Staguu Itincoovar had failed his Apprentice Trial as well, but Ryelli had requested him for the Explorer Corps. His race had a gift for astrogational computation which his latent Force ability enhanced. It was an exceptional talent, but the only one the bony, awkward humanoid possessed.

Ryelli called Staguu his best kept secret. He had plotted the course here to the remote world of Nicht Ka almost without the aid of the navicomputer. Ryelli joked that the Navy would snatch him away for service on some cruiser if they weren't careful. That kind of talk rankled Telloti. What if Ryelli was thinking of training him? Telloti's heart shriveled to think he might be passed over again. He had a destiny. He knew he did. They had told him so, ingrained it in him. Why had the Jedi, why had the Force itself, abandoned him?

"Yes. I'm going to upload some images to the ship's computer. Can you run them through the philology database and transmit me any results?"

"Certainly."

Ryelli hunkered down on a broken column and Telloti watched his face in the glow of his datapad. His eyes went to the scarred, three-fingered hand holding it. A droideka had done that on Geonosis, blown the lightsaber from his grasp. Ryelli could have had the fingers replaced with cybernetics, but he refused. Once Ryelli had told him it was a reminder, but of what, Telloti hadn't asked. Lumas, maybe? Weren't the Jedi supposed to forgo past attachments? How had a man like Ryelli ever become a Jedi Master? And why hadn't Ryelli chosen him as an apprentice that day? He had never asked. After a moment, Ryelli looked up.

"This may take some time, if you want to look around."

Telloti nodded and turned away from the older man. He wandered the corridors of the ancient structure, his torch-light sliding along the stone. Nicht Ka was a world lost to memory along the old Nache Belfia loop that had marked the frontier of the ancient Sith Empire. Ryelli, excited by the prospect of re-surveying it, had jumped at the chance now that it was once again within Republic space, ostensibly inside the 11 th Army's expanding lines. It was no Korriban scattered with forbidding tombs and ancient statues, however. It was a cold, barren rock, lashed by ammonia rains and uninhabitable. Yet Telloti's sensors had detected this hexagonal stone structure set into the broken foothills of the southern mountain range upon entering the atmosphere.

Why anyone would bother to engineer a shelter on this desolate rock was anybody's guess. No one had been here in ages.

Telloti followed the dark corridors aimlessly, hearing the voice of Ryelli and the squelches of Staguu echo behind him.

The light of his torch caught a reflective glint from a dark chamber. Telloti tensed and touched his sporting blaster, but remembered the sensors had detected no lifeforms.

He passed into the room cautiously. The air was cooler here. There was a dais and alcove set into the back wall.

A stone block chair stood atop the dais, and seated on that was a colossal figure forged in reflective black metal. Strange, that metal. He had made tracks across millennia worth of dust on the chamber floor, but the surface of that giant figure shone undimmed, as though nothing would settle on it.

Telloti shined the light across the dais. The broad shoulders of the figure were adorned with wicked spikes, its head an upswept, sinister great helm. A skirt of plated steel encircled its upper legs. It had apparently been vandalized at some point. There was a crooked molten scar across the neck, and the right arm was missing entirely from the elbow down, the stump hollow. It was no statue, he realized, but an archaic suit of battle armor.

He came closer, fogging his breath-mask in excitement. Ryelli would be ecstatic at this discovery. Telloti started to call him, when his eyes fell upon a long object lying on the dais between the metal-shod feet of the figure.

It was an archaic, two-handed lightsaber.

Telloti hesitated. He could take the weapon, slip it into his pack before Ryelli came. It probably didn't work, but he could tinker with it, get it working again, maybe. Ryelli would never know. He knelt down and reached out to take it.

As soon as his fingertips touched it, a wave of cold air blew over him, through his clothes, his skin, through his very soul.

He shivered.

The right-hand gauntlet fell from the bent knee of the seated figure and clamped down over his hand, the whole suit lurching forward, suddenly animate.

No, just shifted, that's all.

He pulled away, skin rippling, but the metal fingers groaned and closed tightly around his wrist.

He put his foot on the dais and pulled. The suit fell forward with a clatter, the great helmet tumbled from the shoulders, and a fine white cloud of bone dust roiled from the neck. Telloti clenched his eyes against the stinging chalk even as it filled his nostrils, choking him. Behind his eyelids, he saw things. A shimmering shadow towering, legions of red skinned warriors spread out to the horizon of an alien world, chanting. "Adas! Adas!" He saw enormous alien warships cast their shadows across the multitude, which raised their pikes in defiance. He saw a gleaming axe cutting down gray amphibian warriors seven at a time, wielded by his own red hand. He saw fire rain down, decimating cities, smashing towers flat. He saw strange stars and the darkness in-between, and a thick book of strange writing, like what they had found on the wall. The axe became a hammer, ringing blows on sheets of glowing metal in a dim workshop, bending it into the form of the ebon armor. He heard a voice.

"Do not worry, my disciple. You will have your place in the history of the galaxy. You will go where I cannot and help restore the glory of the Sith, Warb Null."

He felt pain, searing, his flesh pressed against superheated iron. Was it real? No, more images. Roaring beast riders. Jedi. The clash of battle, just as Master Piell had described it. Exultation. Blood. Then, a single Jedi [Ulic Qel-Droma! his brain screamed) fighting ferociously towards him, cutting away his hand, passing his green blade through his neck.

He shrieked.

Died.

When Telloti opened his eyes again, the helmet was in his hands, poised over his head, its dark iron hood casting a shadow over his blinking eyes. Inside,

secret glyphs glowed with orange light, waiting to brand his cheeks, imbue him with their power.

He had shed his clothes. He was wearing the armor. Only the brown skin of his right hand and face were uncovered.

“Stop!”

He whirled.

Master Ryelli stood in the door in his brown robes. His lightsaber hummed in his malformed hand.

“Take that off, Telloti,” Ryelli urged, a tremor of something in his voice. Fear? It excited him to think a Jedi Master was afraid of him.

“It’s of the Sith. This place... it’s a tomb of some kind. That armor... it’s infested with the dark side of the Force.”

The dark side? With this kind of power, he could be a hammer to crush the dark side. What did Ryelli know? He had no insight at all. Why shouldn’t he take this armor for himself? It had power in it. Real power. He could feel the Force like never before. With it, he could be a warrior. He could join the war, cut his way through legions of battle droids and take the Count of Serenno’s head, be the hero the Republic needed.

“Why did you choose Lumas over me that day, Master Ryelli? What did you see in him that you didn’t see in me?”

“We can talk about that later,” Ryelli said, advancing into the room.

“Maybe you were afraid I’d be a greater Jedi than you. Is that what you thought?”

“You’re not thinking clearly.”

“You’re afraid now, aren’t you? Were you afraid on Geonosis? Is that why Lumas died?”

Ryelli shook his head, grimacing. He would not let Telloti leave with the armor. That was plain. He would send it off to EduCorps to sit in some corner of the Archives.

“You have your lightsaber out. Master. Do you want to fight? I have a lightsaber here...”

“Telloti, it’s the armor...”

“No. You’re wrong. You’ve always been wrong. If I’d been at your side on Geonosis, there’d be no war now. I would’ve killed Dooku. I would’ve crushed the Confederacy in its cradle. As a matter of fact, you’ve only been right about one thing, Master,” he grinned as he slid the helmet over his face and felt the runes inside burn his flesh. He did not cry out. It was no more than a fervent kiss. He ignited the long green blade of the ancient lightsaber. “This is a tomb.”

Ryelli charged.

The armor was like a web of conduits. It drew the Force into him. Telloti felt it surging through his blood vessels, contracting muscles, swinging his arms up to defend the downward stroke of Ryelli’s lightsaber almost before Telloti could even think it. He was fast. So fast. And strong.

He drove Ryelli back with shuddering blows. The emerald sabers flashed and buzzed as they clashed and were batted aside, inadvertently hewing chunks of glowing stone from the walls. Telloti grinned ecstatically behind his grim metal face. His heart thundered.

Ryelli seemed so small now. Was he himself larger? He felt immense. Ryelli’s blade skimmed his shoulder, sending sparks cascading into the air. He laughed. He hadn’t even felt it. He forced Ryelli out into the corridor, and there locked blades with the Jedi Master. Master. What right did he have to that title? This squinting bookworm? This ditch digger? He looked for greatness in small, broken things, and failed to recognize it when it towered over him. The blades squealed and sizzled. Something strange happened. Ryelli forced him back. The Jedi Master with the mangled hand was winning. His expression grew serene. Why was he so calm? It was infuriating, like the face of that girl Enan during the Trials all those years ago, when she’d made a fool of him. Ryelli’s blade angled ever closer, forcing the great two-handed lightsaber of Warb Null down. Telloti’s left knee buckled and clanged against the stone floor.

The archaeologist was stronger. How could that be?

Stronger... perhaps, but not smarter.

Telloti knew the weapon in his hands. Somehow, he knew it. He had fashioned it. millennia ago. Or rather, the man in his vision, Shas Dvos, the man who became Warb Null, had, inspired by the dark teachings of Freedom Nadd and dread King Adas before him. He knew these things. He had their memories, their wisdom, the cunning of the Sith.

His bare thumb felt along the length of the two-handed hilt to a small toggle, and as Ryelli forced his superior position, bearing down with all his strength,

Telloti triggered it and sidestepped.

The extra-long green blade of the ancient lightsaber retracted into the hilt. In the same instant, the butt sprang open like the maw of a sarlacc, revealing a hidden, secondary emitter. A blade of red energy erupted from it, the ingenious mechanism within realigning and refocusing the power in a nanosecond.

Without the resistance of the green blade,

Ryelli stumbled forward, dangerously off balance. Telloti shifted his grip and flipped the new red blade over, slicing neatly through the nape of Ryelli's neck. The Jedi Master tumbled to the floor.

Telloti straightened, listening to the sound of his own breathing, feeling his heart pounding deep behind the black shell of his breastplate.

Ryelli's comlink began to beep.

He stooped and picked it up with his bare hand. He would need to fashion a new gauntlet to replace the one Qel-Droma had destroyed.

He triggered the comm.

"Master," said Stagu.

"I'm getting an urgent

message from Coruscant. It's from the Jedi Temple beacon and it's repeating. It says the war is over!"

The comlink slipped from Telloti's fingers, clattering beside his steel boot.

"Did you hear that, you two? It's over! We've won!"

The glee in the Givin's voice. He laughed. He was actually happy.

Telloti raised his foot and crushed the comlink beneath his heavy heel.

He roared unintelligibly behind the metal helm, ignited the red-bladed lightsaber once more, and chopped at the stone walls and floor in his fury, carving deep gouges, like the marks of some caged beast.

This couldn't be — not when he finally had the power to seize his destiny.

It had to be a lie.

He stalked down the hallway toward the exit.

* * *

Telloti wrenched the body of Staguu from the chair at the communications console, and replayed the message himself.

"Calling all Jedi. This is Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. The war is over. I repeat, the war is over. All Jedi are ordered to return to the Jedi Temple immediately. You will receive further instructions when you arrive." He drove his mailed fist into the speaker, silencing the wizened voice in an explosion of sparks.

He stood then, alone in the cramped cabin of the Pathfinder, over the broken body of the astrogator, listening to the rain pattering the hull, watching the acrid-smelling ammonia streak from his shining metal hide as though repelled by its power, thinking furiously, feeling his heart slide into the deepest pit of his stomach. The old man's words played and replayed in his fevered brain.

Calling all Jedi. The war is over. All Jedi are ordered to return... The answer was there.

That message was not for him. He was no Jedi. He went to the controls and fired up the converters, chuckling to himself.

Maybe this war really was over. But it was a big galaxy.

There was always war somewhere. There were voices in his ears, whispering of glories and triumphs past and yet to come. Dark, hissing voices that promised him secrets, and bade him use those secrets to great and terrible ends.

But not in the name of Telloti Cillmam'n. That was not even a Jedi's name, and he was now something more.

He was Malleus. The Hammer of the Dark Side.

The Confession Of Darth Tyranus

I, Darth Tyranus, make this recording for no other reason than that it will edify future Sith Lords.

It has been twelve years since my former incarnation, the Jedi Master Dooku, voluntarily renounced his commission to the Jedi Order. The years have been fruitful. After leaving the Jedi, I returned to Serenno and claimed my family title of Count, which gave me access to and control over vast fortunes. This allowed the financing of plans conceived by Master Darth Sidious, plans designed to bring about chaos, dividing the Republic as well as the Jedi.

My Master's strategy involved many protracted schedules and labyrinthine details, but I shall summarize my most significant accomplishments: as Darth Tyranus, I took measures to secure what would become an eventual army for the Republic, and as Dooku, I founded and organized the Confederacy of Independent Systems to fight this same army. At present, war rages across the galaxy, and the Jedi do not realize they have been manipulated. In the end, the Jedi will be remembered, if at all, as nothing more than an embarrassing footnote in history, and the Sith will rule, at last bringing structure to the galaxy.

Although the Jedi do currently suspect that I—or more precisely, Count Dooku—have allied myself with the dark side, it is with some satisfaction that I can claim they remain ignorant of my alliance to the Sith. No, I am not surprised that they are so slow to connect the dots. My satisfaction lies in the knowledge that the longer they remain ignorant, the stronger my Master and I grow.

According to the Jedi Archives, at the time I abandoned the Order, I was only the twentieth Jedi Master to do so. It still amuses me to recall the Jedi Council's response when I notified them of my decision to leave. I had already prepared a recorded statement, but they insisted that I come before them. I acquiesced, and Mace Windu greeted me with a single word: "Why?"

Not feeling in any way compelled to reiterate the vague explanations I had already offered in my prepared statement, I looked at Windu quizzically. Not more than three seconds of silence passed when Yoda took it upon himself to answer on my behalf. He said, "Because time it is for him to go." And indeed it was.

But why was the time then, and not years earlier? Why not while I was a youth

at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, when I first became aware of the Sith? Why not when I first realized that the Senate was corrupt beyond salvation, and that the Jedi were nothing more than servants to that corruption? To answer this, I must first tell you something of the Jedi that I was.

Like most Jedi, I was brought to the Jedi Temple at a very early age. I spent years training with Yoda. Although Jedi younglings were not permitted to have contact with their biological families, we were allowed to know of our lineage. By the time I learned of my heritage on Serenno, I was already so committed to learning the ways of the Force and becoming a Jedi that I had no interest in whether my relations had any love for me. I could not have cared less if their vaults contained any reserves in my name, which might provide for me in the unlikely event that I failed to become a Jedi Knight. A true Jedi, I believed, did not think in terms of power.

At the age of thirteen, Jedi Master Thame Cerulian chose me as his Padawan apprentice. Cerulian was a member of the Jedi Council and had an avid interest in history, which included the study of ancient Sith Holocrons. Cerulian never gave me any indication that his interest in the Sith was anything but scholarly; I believe he may have been more intrigued by the provenance and mechanics of the devices than he was ever curious about their contents. But in choosing me as his apprentice, Cerulian aroused the envy of one of my contemporaries, a Jedi learner named Lorian Nod. Nod stole a Sith Holocron from the Jedi Archives and blamed it on me. I had considered Nod a friend, but when the Council questioned me about the allegations, I was compelled by my own sense of honor—as a Jedi—to tell the truth. And so Nod was expelled from the Order.

I found it interesting that the Council stressed that Nod was expelled not for stealing the Sith Holocron, but for lying and implicating me. Although I did not contemplate the Council's reasoning much at the time, I am certain I came away from the experience with the impression that Jedi Masters were more concerned with loyalty and honesty than with the temporary loss of a Sith Holocron. I also learned that friendship was a bond that had its limits, and I made my first enemy.

What became of Lorian Nod, you wonder? Not much, really. He spent some years in and out of prisons, but eventually became something of a leader on Junction 5, his homeworld. I met with him just last year, when I invited the Junction system to join the Confederacy. Nod declined. He's dead now.

I will not inundate you with too much minutiae of my years with the Jedi Order, but eventually I became a Jedi Knight. I was in my early twenties when I took on my first Padawan learner, Qui-Gon Jinn, a rebellious spirit with a deep connection to the living Force. Eventually, I became a Jedi Master. Let it be said that I was a good Jedi. I never shirked from duty, nor was I tempted by the dark side. Was I occasionally outspoken? Yes. And did I prefer some semblance of independence that allowed me to operate beyond the confines of the Jedi Temple? Yes. There was a minor commotion when I turned down an invitation to join the Council, but the Council finally conceded that I better served the Force as a proactive peacekeeper. After all, my proficiency with a lightsaber made me most useful in the field.

And so it was as a Jedi Master, some twenty-four years ago, that I led my Padawan Komari Vosa and a Jedi task force to Galidraan, a snow-covered planet in the

Outer Rim. We had been summoned by Galidraan's governor, who claimed that Mandalorians were committing atrocities against his people.

Thanks to Master Thame Cerulian, I had some knowledge of the history of the Mandalorians, a nomadic group of mercenary warriors with origins that date back many thousand of years. I was also aware that there had been decades of infighting between two Mandalorian factions, but they operated primarily on lawless worlds outside Republic space, rarely drawing attention to themselves as they almost never left any evidence of their handiwork. By all accounts, they were the epitome of professional soldiers.

Because Galidraan was a Republic world and the Mandalorians' alleged actions were as brazen as they were barbaric, I allowed two possibilities: either the butchers on Galidraan were imposters, or something had caused the Mandalorians—whichever faction they were—to change their ways. Tragically, I did not allow for a third possibility: Galidraan's governor had lied, and the Jedi Council had believed him.

Five Consular-class cruisers delivered our task force to Galidraan. Komari Vosa and I traveled on the Acceptance. Our entire task force totaled twenty Jedi, all hastily withdrawn from various respective assignments for this emergency. The Jedi Council had selected us not because of our combat experience but because of our proximity to Galidraan and how fast we could get there. I was the senior Jedi Master, and when I realized that most of my comrades' awareness of the Mandalorians was . . . shall we say . . . limited, I was beyond chagrined.

Yes, the situation was urgent. Innocent people really were being slaughtered on Galidraan. Against any other small army,

twenty Jedi would have been more than enough. But based on what I knew of the Mandalorians, I did not hesitate to request reinforcements from the Jedi Council. In hindsight, I should have insisted. But reinforcements could only travel so fast through hyperspace, and, as I said, innocents were dying.

We located the Mandalorians in a small valley, and had the high ground when we surrounded them. I wasn't surprised when they refused to surrender.

Galidraan was a bloodbath.

When the conflict ended, eleven Jedi and all but one of the Mandalorians lay dead in the snow. Komari Vosa was still standing, having slain twenty Mandalorians single-handedly. The surviving Mandalorian, I soon learned, was named Jango Fett. He'd killed three Jedi with his bare hands. As a Jedi, I could neither hate nor fear Fett, but I did feel something for him that surprised me. I felt respect.

Had Fett and I been the only survivors of that battle, I would have lowered my lightsaber and bid him safe journey. He was the last of his kind, and I'd never known another being who so thoroughly deserved to go wherever he pleased. But other Jedi had survived, and I doubted that we were unanimous in our regard for Fett. In the end, it was the Council who decided his fate, for via transmission they ordered me to turn him over to Galidraan's governor. And like a gutless animal, I obeyed.

The governor remained in power, and Fett was sold into slavery. Although Jedi lives had been lost, it was quickly concluded that we had accomplished our mission, and there was no subsequent investigation.

Eventually, I learned the entire fiasco had been a setup. The civilians had been killed not by Fett's faction, the True Mandalorians, but by the Mandalorian Death Watch. Hoping to crush the True Mandalorians, Death Watch's leader had collaborated with Galidraan's governor to lure Fett's faction with a false assignment, then summoned the Jedi for help.

Even though I knew that the Senate was corrupt, the Council was fallible, and Jedi training methods were far from perfect, I remained with the Jedi Order for twelve years after Galidraan. Why? Because I still believed that I could accomplish some good as a Jedi. I thought I could bring about some positive changes, right certain wrongs, and do better than maintain the status quo. In short, I was an utter fool. Even worse, and I confess this with some degree of shame, I could not imagine a life beyond the Order. I was weak.

But then I met Darth Sidious. He showed me the way to the dark side, and he made me strong.

**From the Officials Records of the Senate of
the Old Republic**

Senator Mon Mothma of Chandrila: Madam Speaker, it is obvious that my learned friend from Alderaan refuses to acknowledge the peril in which we find ourselves. If we do not take bold, definitive action — and quickly — this great Republic will die, or worse, will be transformed into something foul and evil. We must act *now* to preserve the principles upon which this Republic was founded!

Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan: Madam Speaker, no one argues that we are in great peril. We are. This Republic is in more danger than it has ever been. Corruption is everywhere. Basic services are breaking down. The Navy is almost out of our control. It is as if the very fabric of our civilization is unraveling. However, I do not see how the Senate can do anything about that if we spend all of our time in useless debate over the “big issues”! We must do what we can — not argue over what we cannot!

Senator Mothma: And so we repair the plumbing while our ship plunges into a sun!

Senator Bail Organa: Better that than do nothing!

Republic Commando – Kashyyyk

As the war drags onward, Delta Squad participates in increasingly dangerous missions. A cry for help is heard by the Republic from the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk, where Trandoshan slavers have established their camps and are enslaving the Wookiees with the help of Separatist weaponry. Delta Squad is sent to rescue the Wookiee chieftain Tarfful, which has been captured by the Trandoshan presence on this planet weeks before the beginning of Delta Squad's mission. Delta is secretly inserted in the deep jungle of Kashyyyk near one of the Trandoshan slaver camps and proceeds through the main entrance. After entering with some difficulties with a trap set by the slavers, the squad infiltrates the camp and releases few imprisoned Wookiees. Moving through the camp, they spot a starfighter that looks familiar to the Advisor. He then tasks them finding the ship and letting the command get a closer look to identify it. As they proceed to the designated landing pad, they spot the ship and it's owner, General Grievous himself. As the General realizes he's seen, he warms up his fighter to escape. Deltas are now tasked to quickly get to him and stop him. On the way to the landing pad, they finally meet Tarfful, the captured Wookiee chieftain. When they spot him behind a force field, he is being held by two IG-100 MagnaGuards and dragged to Grievous's ship, but

shortly after they get out of Deltas' sight, the Wookiee defeats the droids, returns and awaits Delta Squad, which is placing a charge to breach the force field and prevent General Grievous from escaping. In the time Deltas get to Tarfful and breach the door leading to the landing pad, Grievous's fighter is already taking off and two of his bodyguard droids attack Deltas. They're ordered to protect Tarfful at all costs as he has information vital to the Republic, however the Wookiee refuses to stand back and fights the tough droids himself

After that, Delta Squad sabotages a vital Trandoshan supply depot and proceeds to the key battle of Kachirho, the beginning of the battle of Kashyyyk. There, they move through the Wookiee tree city, securing important objectives and battling against hordes of advanced battle droids. They destroy the Bridge at Kachirho, cutting the droid army off from its reinforcements, and proceed to secure the Citadel. Soldiering through the most elite CIS forces and weaponry, Delta Squad once again splits up to man four Heavy AA turrets in order to assist in the destruction of a *Recusant*-class light destroyer. Once the ship is destroyed, Advisor orders the Deltas to regroup at 38's position. However, Sev does not make the rendezvous and the squad manages to grab a last transmission from him, in which it's clear that he is under heavy attack and is possibly injured or killed. Delta Squad prepares to rescue Sev, but the commander orders them to pull back. As they head out on the gunship, devastated by the loss of their comrade, they are debriefed by Jedi Master Yoda. A huge Republic fleet is seen deploying outside the gunship, as Delta Squad prepares for another assignment in the battle.

19 bby

Reversal Of Fortune







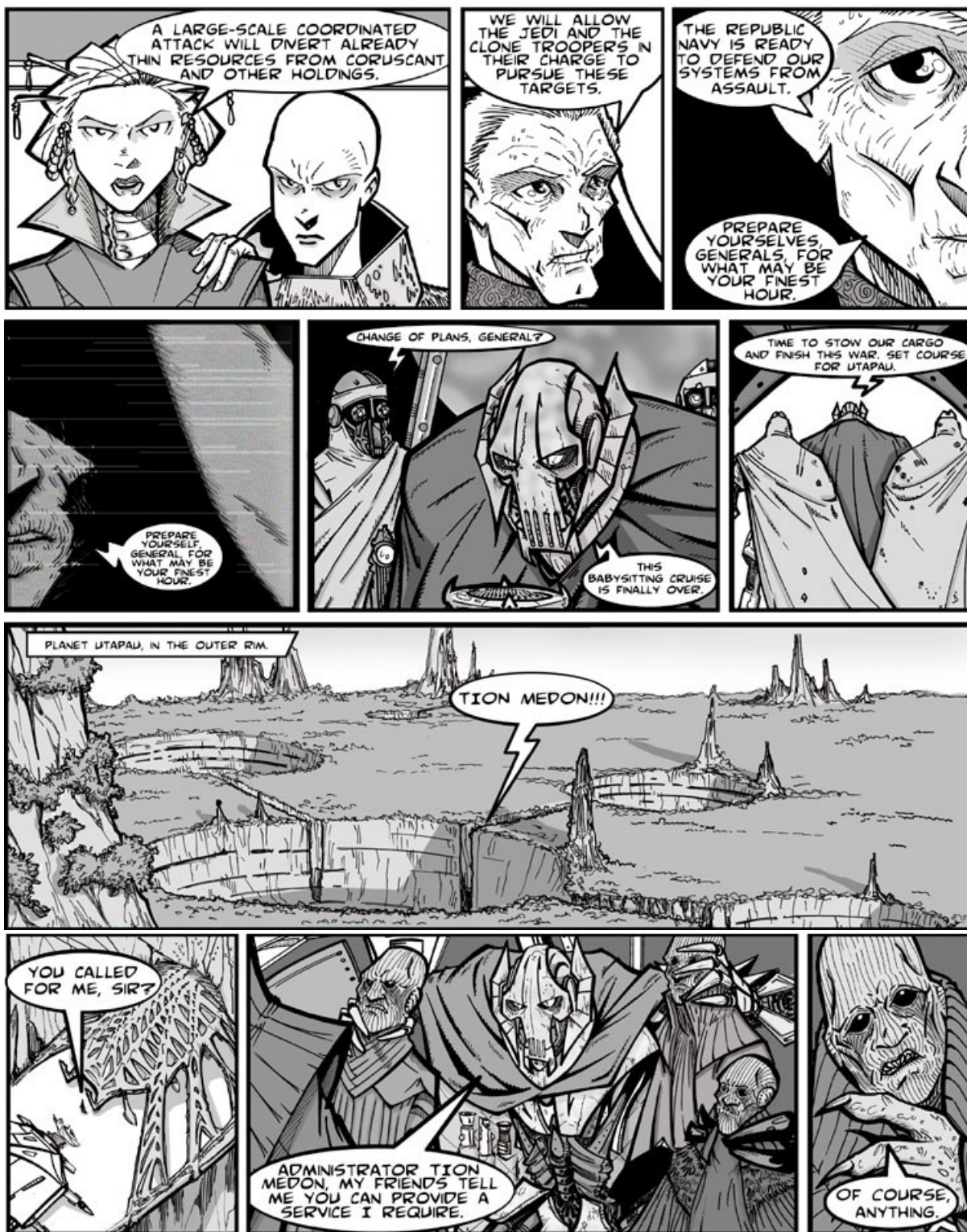








































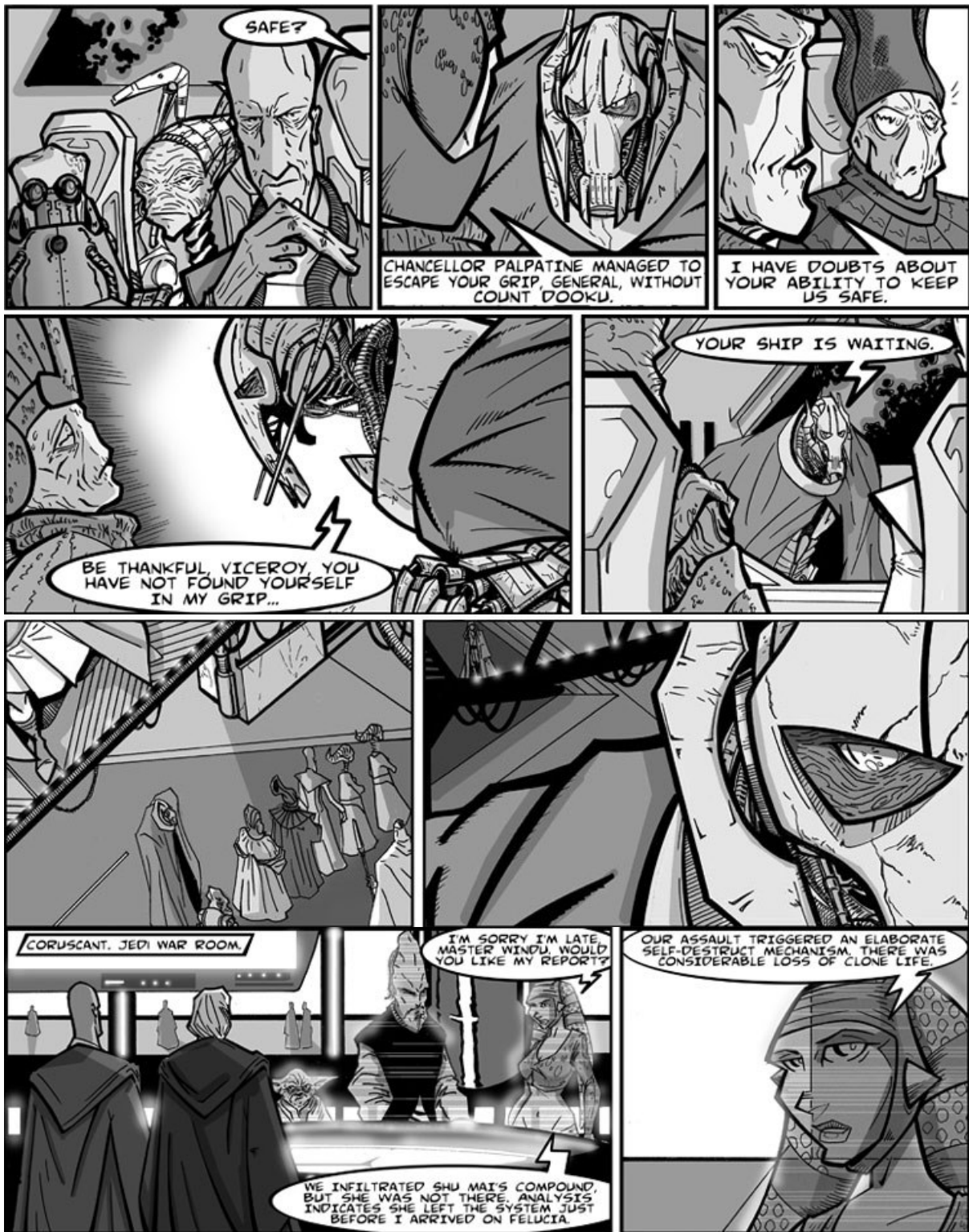


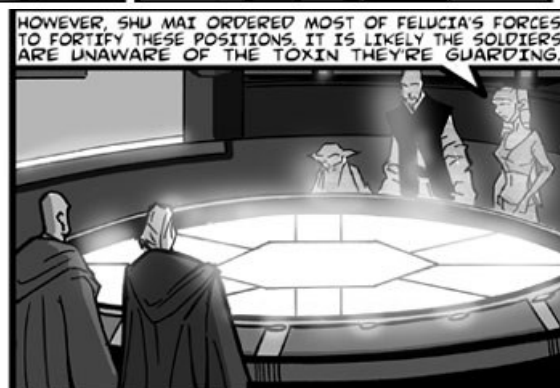




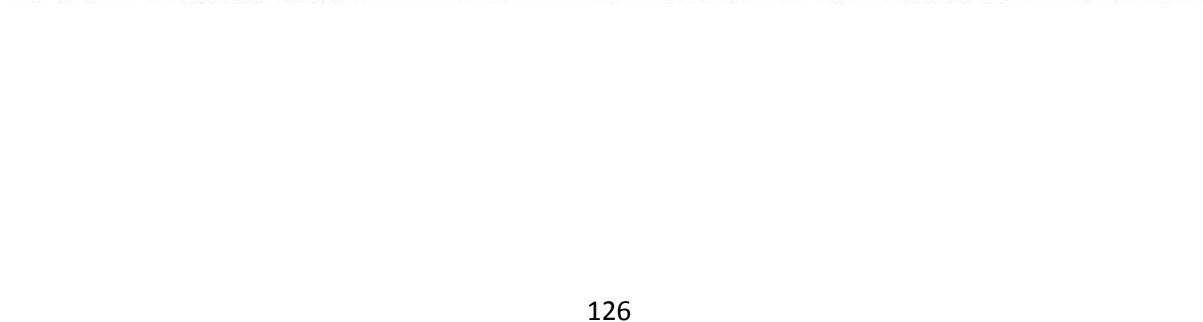






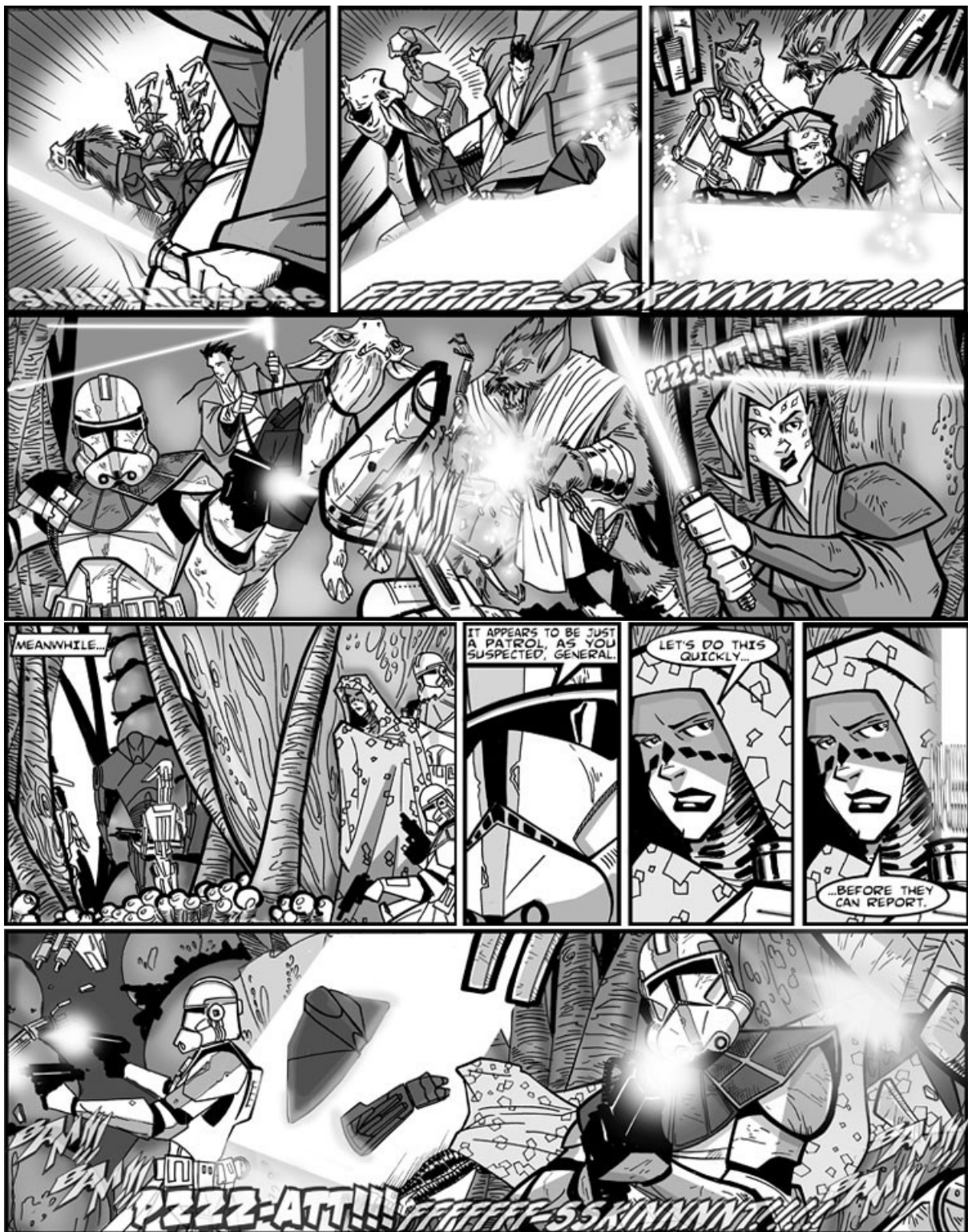


























Journal Of The 501st

Mygeeto- Amongst the Ruins

In the waning months of the Clone Wars, the 501st faced missions critical to the agenda of Chancellor Palpatine. When we arrived at the bombed-out ruins of Mygeeto, our Jedi commander believed we had been sent to take out a droid energy collector. What Ki-Adi-Mundi didn't know however was that our unit of the 501st was really after an experimental Mygeetan power source that the Chancellor wanted for his "superlaser." Keeping Mundi in the dark wasn't easy; the Jedi had become increasingly wary of the Chancellor's doings, and were on the lookout for the slightest hint of treachery. Just like the rest of them though, he never caught a whiff of what was really going on until it was far too late.

The success of the mission on Mygeeto was something of a revelation for the men of the 501st. Suddenly, we realized that the Jedi could be fooled. And if they could be fooled, they could be killed.

Coruscant Space- A Desperate Rescue

As the Clone Wars progressed, more and more ground-based legions found themselves pressed into space combat, including the fighting forces of the 501st. For months, every hour of our downtime was spent in the simulator, preparing for the time we would face our enemies from the cockpit of a 170. Finally the day came to earn our wings. The CIS had staged a daring kidnapping of Chancellor Palpatine, and was being escorted from Coruscant by a fleet of Separatist ships. With only a few veteran pilots on-planet, many of the 501st were pressed into service to drive off the Seps and buy time for a pair of Jedi Knights to rescue the Chancellor.

After disabling the final capital ship, General Kenobi and Skywalker took advantage of the opportunity we'd created and rescued the Chancellor. Took all the credit, too.

Felucia- Heart of Darkness

It's been said that the 501st got the best of the war. We also got the worst. On Felucia, the Seps dug their metal heels into the muck of that alien hellhole and dared the Republic to come in after them. So we did, only to be met with month after month of flesh-eating diseases, shrieking nocturnal predators, and other sights that haunt me to this day. Cut off and, for all we knew, abandoned by our superiors, our only hope was Aayla Secura, our Jedi commander. Without her iron will, none of us would have come out of that mess with our sanity or our lives. When her death came, I hope it was quick. She earned that much.

When the 501st was finally rotated out of Felucia, Aayla Secura made a point of seeing us off personally, calling us "the bravest soldiers she had ever seen." It's a good thing we were wearing helmets, because none of us could bear to look her in the eye.

Kashyyyk: Space-First Line of Defence

When the Separatists' invasion of Kashyyyk caught the Republic flatfooted, a detachment of the 501st was sent in to stop the bleeding until reinforcements could arrive. It was a textbook suicide mission and we knew it. As we fought our way into Kashyyyk's atmosphere, most of us believed that the only way we'd be getting off this planet was in a body bag.

As the 501st finally broke through the Sep blockade over Kashyyyk, I took a long look back at the battle that continued to rage over the planet, and wondered why so many had to die for a bunch of walking carpets. Then I followed my orders, and turned planetward.

When we arrived on Kashyyyk, things were just as bad as we'd feared. The droids had us outgunned, outmaneuvered, and outmanned by a five-to-one margin. What none of us had counted on was the Wookiees. We'd all heard the stories, of course, but we'd never fought next to them, never seen them rip apart a droid with their bare hands. They were magnificent. Even so it was still a suicide mission. At least it was until Master Yoda arrived. Then it became a battle. A winnable battle.

With the timely arrival of Master Yoda, the 501st was able to hold the line against the Seps on Kashyyyk. We left as heroes. Years later, we'd return as conquerors.

Utapau- Underground Ambush

In our bones, we knew the war was almost over. The Galaxy held its breath, waiting to see which side would make the final daring move. As fortune would have it, the Republic moved first. After the Chancellor informed the Jedi Council that General Grievous and the Sep leaders were hiding on Utapau, General Kenobi gathered an army large enough to capture three star systems. When the orders reached the 501st, our morale soared. For better or worse, this would be the beginning of the end.

With the death of General Grievous at the hands of General Kenobi, the Utapau raid had broken the back of the Separatists. Under normal circumstances, it would have been a time for celebration. But our next orders put paid to those thoughts.

Coruscant - Operation: Knightfall

What I remember about the rise of the Empire is... is how quiet it was. During the waning hours of the Clone Wars, the 501st Legion was discreetly transferred back to Coruscant. It was a silent trip. We all knew what was about to happen and what we were about to do. Did we have any doubts? Any private, traitorous thoughts? Perhaps, but no one said a word. Not on the flight back to Coruscant, not when Order 66 came down, and not when we marched into the Jedi Temple. Not a word.

With the fall of Coruscant and the elimination of the traitorous Jedi, Palpatine's rise to power was complete. In recognition of our service and loyalty to the Emperor, the 501st were placed under the direct command of Lord Vader. Armed with deadly new weapons, blazing new ships, and shining new armor, our presence let the galaxy know that the days of the Old Republic were well and truly over. We were establishing a new era, an era of order and peace.

Republic HoloNet News Special Inaugural Edition 16:5:24

Citizens of the civilized galaxy, on this day we mark a transition. For a thousand years, the Republic stood as the crowning achievement of civilized beings. But there were those who would set us against one another, and we took up arms to defend our way of life against the Separatists. In so doing, we never suspected that the greatest threat came from within.

The Jedi, and some within our own Senate, had conspired to create the shadow of Separatism using one of their own as the enemy's leader. They had hoped to grind the Republic into ruin. But the hatred in their hearts could not be hidden forever. At last, there came a day when our enemies showed their true natures.

The Jedi hoped to unleash their destructive power against the Republic by assassinating the head of government and usurping control of the clone army. But the aims of would-be tyrants were valiantly opposed by those without elitist, dangerous powers. Our loyal clone troopers contained the insurrection within the Jedi Temple and quelled uprisings on a thousand worlds.

The remaining Jedi will be hunted down and defeated! Any collaborators will suffer the same fate. These have been trying times, but we have passed the test. The attempt on my life has left me scarred and deformed, but I assure you my resolve has never been stronger. The war is over. The Separatists have been defeated, and the Jedi rebellion has been foiled. We stand on the threshold of a new beginning. In order to ensure our security and continuing stability, the Republic will be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire, for a safe and secure society, which I assure you will last for ten thousand years. An Empire that will continue to be ruled by this august body and a sovereign ruler chosen for life. An Empire ruled by the majority, ruled by a new constitution!

By bringing the entire galaxy under one law, one language, and the enlightened guidance of one individual, the corruption that plagued the Republic in its later years will never take root. Regional governors will eliminate the bureaucracy that allowed the Separatist movement to grow unchecked. A strong and growing military will ensure the rule of law.

Under the Empire's New Order, our most cherished beliefs will be safeguarded. We will defend our ideals by force of arms. We will give no ground to our enemies and will stand together against attacks from within or without. Let the

enemies of the Empire take heed: those who challenge Imperial resolve will be crushed.

We have taken on a task that will be difficult, but the people of the Empire are ready for the challenge. Because of our efforts, the galaxy has traded war for peace and anarchy for stability. Billions of beings now look forward to a secure future. The Empire will grow as more planets feel the call, from the Rim to the wilds of unknown space.

Imperial citizens must do their part. Join our grand star fleet. Become the eyes of the Empire by reporting suspected insurrectionists. Travel to the corners of the galaxy to spread the principles of the New Order to barbarians. Build monuments and technical wonders that will speak of our glory for generations to come.

The clone troopers, now proudly wearing the name of Imperial stormtroopers, have tackled the dangerous work of fighting our enemies on the front lines. Many have died in their devotion to the Empire. Imperial citizens would do well to remember their example.

The New Order of peace has triumphed over the shadowy secrecy of shameful magicians. The direction of our course is clear. I will lead the Empire to glories beyond imagining.

We have been tested, but we have emerged stronger. We move forward as one people: the Imperial citizens of the first Galactic Empire. We will prevail. Ten thousand years of peace begins today.

Palpatine's Triumphs: A Celebration

47BrS:8:11

Palpatine is born on Naboo

17BrS:10:05

Following defeats in runs for low-level Naboo positions, Palpatine is elected sectorial senator for his home sector of Chommell. He is reelected multiple times.

3:4:14

The Trade Federation invades Naboo. After the ineffectual Supreme Chancellor Valorum is forced out, Palpatine is overwhelmingly elected in his place. He brings about a swift end to the crisis.

5:3:13

Palpatine's political text, *The Paths to Power*, tops the best-seller list.

7:10:05

Palpatine wins reelection to the post of Supreme Chancellor.

8:2:11

Palpatine approves measure 4213.0410, sponsoring the Outbound Flight Project, which departs from Yaga Minor on a mission to pierce the Unknown Regions, and the galactic barrier.

9:9:26

The Senate modifies the Republic constitution, allowing Palpatine to remain in office to lead the galaxy through the threat of Count Dooku's Separatist movement.

13:5:21

The Senate gives Chancellor Palpatine emergency war powers to deal with the crisis. Palpatine raises the Grand Army of the Republic and takes the fight to Count Dooku in the conflict now called the Clone Wars

16:5:23

Palpatine smashed a traitorous Jedi rebellion and wins the Clone Wars. A euphoric Senate appoints him Emperor-for-life.

COMPOR Reorganized

Imperial City, Coruscant – The Empire gained a new body of guardians today with the introduction of COMPNOR, a volunteer corps of civilian patriots that replaces the Commission for Preservation of the Republic, or COMPOR.

The new organization, officially called the Commission for the Preservation of the New Order, proclaimed its mission as the “defense of Imperial precepts through strength and truth” in a ceremony held this morning at the Pliada di am Imperium. Thousands of uniformed marchers, carrying red-and-white banners emblazoned with the official Imperial seal, paraded down the Glitannai Esplanade and massed in front of the palace's reviewing balcony. The Emperor did not make an appearance, but Imperial advisor Crueya Vandron briefly greeted the crowd to raucous cheers.

“COMPNOR is ready to lead the Empire into a thousand years of dominance,” said Ishin Il-Raz, the former spokesman for COMPOR and head of COMPNOR's Select Committee. “To our Emperor, and to all Imperial citizens, we proudly report for duty.”

Established during the turmoil of the Clone Wars, COMPOR was a volunteer corps committed to supporting Chancellor Palpatine and the Republic war

effort. The group became known for its “credits for clones” resource drives and its enthusiastic rallies.

COMPNOR promises to be much more ambitious.

“Advisor Vandron is in full support of our mission and has made a commitment to growing COMPNOR,” said Il-Raz. Already present in the organization’s manifest are the Coalition for Progress, a division to review the purity of Imperial cultural endeavors, and the Coalition for Improvements, a division designed to promote the use of standardized imperial technology. Speculation is rife that the newly formed Imperial Security Bureau, an offshoot of Imperial Intelligence, will be folded into the organizational structure of COMPNOR. The largest division of COMPNOR is its youth program, known as SAGroup (Sub-Adult Group). Former graduates of SAGroup during its Republic incarnation have since announced their intentions to serve the Empire as part of CompForce, an independent para-military unit under the guidance of COMPNOR’s Select Committee.

COMPNOR will be holding recruitment drives on more than 200 Core Worlds over the next month.

“Come out and show your support for the New Order,” urged Il-Raz. “Meet our members, then become a member yourself. You don’t want to be the only one in your neighbourhood who isn’t part of COMPNOR.”

Sixty-Three Senators Arrested In Collusion With Jedi Insurgency

Imperial City, Coruscant – Imperial Intelligence scored a dramatic victory against the plotters of the Jedi rebellion today, arresting 63 senators on charges of conspiracy and treason. Those arrested included a number of senators from prominent Core Worlds as well as many alien senators from Outer Rim worlds where lawlessness is known to run rampant.

“We are cheered by this victory but deeply disappointed that public servants could fail the Emperor so completely,” said Armand Isard, director of Imperial Intelligence. “Be confident that we will not relent until the prisoners have given up the names of their accomplices.”

Most of the identities of the 63 senators are still classified. Only a partial list has been released as of press time. All of the names on the list had also been signatories of the Petition of 2000, a formal protest against Palpatine’s new

system of regional governorship signed by 2000 legislators and presented during the last full Senate session.

The remaining signatories of the petition were subdued in their reaction to the latest arrests. "I support the Emperor's efforts to ensure the safety of all Imperial citizens," said Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan in a statement issued by his office.

The late Senator Padmé Amidala of Naboo, one of the architects of the Petition of 2000, was remembered by Queen Apailana as "an outspoken idealist but someone very devoted to the principles of security represented by the Empire. It is our hope that His Imperial Majesty will not hold this petition against the people of Naboo, who are electing a new senator to better illustrate our openness to the Empire's New Order."

Director Isard would not say whether more arrests were forthcoming. Isard urged all Imperial citizens to obtain the full list of the signatories of the Petition of 2000 to ensure that their interests are being fairly represented by those in power.

A short time later, Republic HoloNet News posted an update:

Updated: The Arrests – Is Your Senator A Traitor?

The following names are the latest added to the roster of 63 arrests:

Ivor Drake of Kestos Minor

Streamdrinker of Tynna

Shea Sadashassa of Herdessa

Tanner Cadaman of Feenix

Grebbeips of Brodo Asogi

Fang Zar of Sern Prime

Trade Federation Signs Treaty: Nationalization Underway

Koto-Si, Neimodia – Sentepeth Findos, acting viceroy of the Trade Federation, signed a treaty today that gives the Empire direct control of the cartel's vast resources. Widely expected in the wake of the Confederacy of Independent Systems' defeat in the Clone Wars, the agreement gives control of all Trade Federation holdings, effective immediately, to Emperor Palpatine and the Emperor's designated corporations.

“As the Trade Federation signs this treaty of peace with the Empire, we recognize that our constituent parts are no longer under our control,” said Findos. “We ask only that the Emperor grant us special dispensation during the distribution of assets in light of our proven track record in business.” Findos was then escorted out of the room by stormtrooper guards.

The biggest private beneficiaries of the nationalization are likely to be companies with close ties to the Imperial government (see sidebar), particularly loyalist corporations who contributed their resources to help ensure the Republic’s victory in the Clone Wars.

Not all branches of the Trade Federation are happy with the terms of the treaty. Speaking from the Mid Rim commercial hub of Enarc, Customs Vizier Mararh Voro called Findos’ authority illegitimate. “Where is [viceroy Nute] Gunray? Where is [settlement officer Rune] Haako? A third-tier flunky has no right to negotiate on the Trade Federation’s behalf.”

Voro warned of armed resistance from his planet and other outposts like it. “We have our battleships. We have our droids. If Palpatine wants our wealth, let him come and take it.”

Topline Data

What’s Affected? – All Trade Federation holdings are now owned by the Empire. Expect most assets to be absorbed into loyalist companies, such as Kuat Drive Yards, Sienar Systems, TaggeCo, and Merr-Sonn.

What Happens to the Trade Federation? – The Trade Federation’s ruling directorate has been dismantled. Furthermore, the conglomerate forfeited its senatorial voting power when it joined the CIS at the start of the Clone Wars. Unless the Emperor keeps the name intact (unlikely), the 350-year-old organization essentially no longer exists.

What’s Next? – Expect similar action on the InterGalactic Banking Clan, the Commerce Guild, the Corporate Alliance, and other CIS signatories.

Meet Your Regional Governors: Part One In A Series

Under the Old Republic, Senate-only representation lacked direction and purpose. The new system of regional governorship, while not replacing the Senate, will cut the bureaucracy considerably. Your territory now has an overseer with the ear of Emperor Palpatine himself.

The territories controlled by regional governors have been laid out according to military need, permitting free movement across the borders that confine sectorial senators. In an evocative tribute to the satraps of the small space empires who grew the ancient Republic, the Emperor has bestowed upon his governors the honorary title of Moff.

Steely eyed and confident, these proud men are at the vanguard of Emperor Palpatine's bold New Order. What can you expect from your regional governor?

Security – Pirates, smugglers, and secessionists allied with the failed Jedi rebellion have reason to tremble. Your regional governor has direct jurisdiction over Star Destroyers and stormtroopers, and will vigilantly defend the lives of imperial citizens.

Ideological Freedom – You deserve to live in an Empire where you and your neighbors can openly express your love for Imperial ideals, and where alien teachings and other controversial subjects aren't shoved down your children's throats in the name of 'fairness.' Your regional governors, in conjunction with COMPNOR [the Commission for the Preservation of the New Order], are already modernizing the educational system.

A Direct Role in Government – Your increased taxes are helping pay for our military and expanded Imperial services.

Wilhuff Tarkin– With the sharp features of a hawk-bat, this rising star from the Outer Rim commercial hub of Eriadu holds entire star systems in his grip. A former commander in the Republic Regions security force, Tarkin was most recently the lieutenant governor of Eriadu. He now oversees the greater Seswenna sector with a special emphasis on emerging military technology.

Denn Wessex– As a commander aboard the Venator-class Star Destroyer Redoubt, Wessex showed courage under fire that made him a hero at the Battle of Boz Pity. This technological genius recently married Lira Blissex, one of the chief designers of the Venator-class, and even more ambitious naval vessels are sure to result from their pairing. Governor Wessex's responsibilities include the management of territory centered around the greater Relgim sector.

Marcellin Wessel— The mystifying ways of aliens are no puzzle for this firm-handed administrator, who toured the galaxy's remote battlefronts as a colonel commanding the Republic's clone troopers. From his base in the Immalia sector, Governor Wessel supervises the surrounding quadrant, keeping a watchful eye on local tribal rebellions.

Citizens Urged To Register For Their Safety

If you've never registered, register today. If you've already registered as part of the Republic census, register again – it's the only way to get your new Imperial identichip. The identichip will allow officials to better screen out threats to your safety, including Jedi spies. Those caught without identichips can be subject to fines and imprisonment. Forging an indentichip is punishable by life at a penal colony.

What's New? – Citizens will note some new sections on the expanded Imperial registration form. These include:

- Political Persuasion: Please answer all questions to the best of your ability (essay-style responses are welcome). The fashion with which you express your loyalty will give Imperial officials valuable feedback, allowing them to respond more quickly to your particular needs.

- Weapons: All weapons must be declared under this section, or you could face severe penalties. Imperial officials will review your license application to determine if there is a need for your continued ownership of the item. Please provide the names of family or acquaintances you believe to have weapons. This information will be cross-referenced against their own registration forms to ensure their safety.

The New Empire: How Can You Help?

The war has been won and the Jedi rebellion smashed. We, as Imperial citizens, have much to cheer. But now our enemies have gone underground, and we must remain vigilant. All across the Empire, citizens are asking, "How can we help?"

Humans are the proud people of the Core, upon whose shoulders the banner of our glorious Empire is held aloft. As a human, there are many ways to do your part:

- Become A Clone Donor: As the war's heroes take up their new roles as defenders of the Empire, they need your help. If you are a man between the ages of 18 and 30 and scored in the top fifth percentile on your GAR physical exam, an agent will be contacting you shortly. Leave your mark on future generations!

- Join The Military: if you didn't score in the top five percent, we still need you! The Emperor has a grand vision for our star fleet and expanded army. Visit a recruiting center today!

- Can't Qualify For The Military? Join COMPNOR: The Commission for the Preservation of the New Order (see story this edition) is filled with people just like you who want their Empire to shine. It's also your exclusive source for breaking news on the latest triumphs of the Galactic Empire. When you join, you get a free subscription to Iron Will (the official feed of COMPNOR) plus a special welcome message from Emperor Palpatine himself!

- Become The "Eyes Of The Empire": Have you seen anything suspicious? Report it! A Jedi could be hiding in your district right now, and sadly, not all politicians are serious about this imminent threat to your safety. Ask yourself: If your neighbor isn't helping, isn't he part of the problem? Your reports might not seem like much to you, but they'll help our agents uncover just how far the Jedi conspiracy has spread. Don't just suspect it – report it!

If You're An Alien...: Aliens have a vital role to play in our new society. As an alien, please contact the Imperial Social planning office. Our representatives can help you with:

- Ensuring your datawork is up to date
 - Assisting you in finding comfortable housing close to others of your species
 - Getting you in on the ground floor as a team member responsible for building one of our exciting new construction projects
- Remember – We are imperials! We will prevail!

Senate Rotunda Still Closed for Repairs

Pestage to Squibs: Orbital Wrecks Not Public Salvage

Industrial Accident on Mustafar Drives Dolovite To 760 Credits/Barrel

Caamasi Cancel "Rainbow of Sunshine" Festival

Point/Counterpoint: Imperial Rule and the Corporate Sector – Bad for Business?

Be Alert!

The following is a partial list of Jedi still at large. If you have any information leading to the arrest of these dangerous fugitives, contact Imperial Intelligence at any public comm node:

- Kai Justiss
- Halagad Ventor
- Qu Rahn
- Ydra Kilwallen
- Maw the Boltrunian
- Ranik Solusar

Final Update

This will be the last edition of HoloNet News. For future updates, please set your transceiver to Imperial Holovision.

END TRANSMISSION.

Incognito

“You, there! Leave her alone!”

Dewell Bronk’s entreaty was barely more than a whisper, and it was no surprise that the toughs didn’t hear him. He looked urgently across the aisle of the transport at the delinquents, a pair of young, horn-headed Devaronians. They’d been hassling the poor old Twi’lek woman since she’d boarded. When they had first yanked at her satchel, she had resisted briefly, but now she looked on meekly as the youths pawed through her belongings.

Dewell wanted to tell them to stop. Louder, this time. He could: he had an authoritative voice, one he was famous for. But that was in a different world, one where his small stature meant very little. No one was going to listen to a meter-tall, pudgy Kedorzhan in the lower hold of a passenger transport.

He looked around in desperation. The Tallaan Clipper had no security personnel on this level, just the frightening-looking first officer that Dewell never wanted to talk to again. He missed his bodyguards, who could have sorted this out in an instant. But he hadn’t seen them since he hurriedly left his apartment on Coruscant. He expected he would never see them — or the apartment — again.

No, for the first time in ages, Dewell Bronk was alone and without help. And worst of all, he was unable to help — a new experience for the three-time recipient of the Coruscant Benevolent Society's Good Neighbor of the Year award.

Life had changed. And he already hated it.

One of the Devaronians looked directly at him: an angry stare. Feeling his public-spiritness flee with his courage, Dewell instantly looked away. His whiskered jowls sagged, and he sank low in his seat. He was being foolish. How could he be anyone's rescuer now, when he was trying to avoid attention?

Worried, he felt again for the weight by his feet. Everything he owned was in a sack, tied with a small rope that he had looped around his ankle. Since leaving on the first leg of his odyssey, he had kept the bag mashed between his heels; he didn't want to wake from sleep to find it stolen. Not that there was anything much to take. The credits he'd planned to use in his escape were already gone; spent, to pay for his seat on this transport and the next one, and for the single meal a day that was supposed to come with the fares.

It was a sad predicament for someone who had lived his life close to the bright spots of the galaxy, traveling at will and, occasionally, in style. That moment had passed — and might never return again. Now Dewell, someone who had fought for justice his whole career, was reduced to doing nothing as thieves harassed an elderly fellow being. He could hear it: they were pulling rudely at her head-tendrils now. Dewell's heart ached. There was nothing he could do.

"You don't want to disturb that woman," a nearby voice said. Its tones were warm and confident. A human voice, Dewell thought, but he didn't dare to look up. Some poor hero was about to be thrashed.

"We don't want to disturb this woman," a gruff Devaronian voice responded.

Puzzled, Dewell leaned over and peeked across the aisle. The two hoodlums had dropped the Twi'lek's pouch and were walking to the ladder leading to the upper level. The person who had spoken first was the human who had boarded at the previous stop — the one Dewell had mentally labeled "the Young Father."

Dewell didn't know if the human was father to the child. Nor did he really know how young the man was. Kedorzhan eyes were sharp in the dark, but most other species lived in the light. Kedorzhans seldom opened their eyes beyond a crack in daylight. Dewell had always refused to wear a visor, feeling it better to be able to look directly into the eyes of his listeners, even if it meant he often had trouble telling one person from another. To Dewell, people tended to become shapes, happy and sad, cruel and innocent. In the harshly lit cabin, the Young Father was a kindly blur, his face obscured by a brown hood as he cradled the bundled infant.

Dewell looked left and right. No one else had seen or heard what had happened with the Devaronians; everyone else had moved away, fearful to get involved. And now the Twi'lek moved, too, grabbing her bag and rushing off to the rear compartment. The Young Father sighed and sat in her vacated seat.

"That's telling those punks," Dewell said reflexively. He knew it was a mistake for a fugitive to speak to a stranger — even a chivalrous one. Who knew how many people were searching for him, and what tactics their agents might use? But the human barely turned. Beneath the man's cowl, the Kedorzhan made out two shining blue-gray dots in a hairy face.

"Just some high-spirited kids," the human said.

"I know young spirits," Dewell said. His broad nose twitched disdainfully. "Those were criminals." He cleared his throat. "You should report them to the captain."

"It's really not necessary."

Dewell sighed, embarrassed. So brave, volunteering someone else to do the right thing. The Young Father had taken one risk but would go no further. Seeing the child fussing in the man's arms, Dewell couldn't blame him.

The human checked and rechecked the child's wrappings. Even with his poor eyesight, Dewell could tell the man was puzzled.

"Your child is hungry," Dewell said.

"He just ate a little while ago," the Young Father replied. "I didn't think it was time again."

“The child decides when it is time again,” Dewell said, feeling a little more comfortable. He grinned as the human went fishing in his backpack for a bottle. New parents were amusing. Dewell had only had time for seven children in his life; not many for a Kedorzhan, but there had been so many more important things to do. Now, squinting at the infant, Dewell found himself wishing that he’d spent more time with his own children — and wondering where all of them were today.

Well, he knew where one was. Poor Tyloor was dead, his body lost somewhere out on the battlefield. Dead, like so many other children of the Republic, in a conflict that had never made any sense to Dewell. And while the Clone Wars were thankfully — and suddenly — over, the main battle of the Kedorzhan’s career seemed lost, too.

The Kedorzhans were a small people in height, power, and numbers. Short-legged with four fat fingers on each hand, they had migrated everywhere underground work was to be found. Most worlds had welcomed the the pleasant, plump-faced people; they kept to themselves and caused few problems. When the Kedorzhans had finally obtained Republic representation and a Senate seat, many had assumed that the diminutive beings would conduct themselves just as Dewell was now. Certainly, they would mind their own business, taking the lead of other species while trying not to be noticed.

But Dewell and his illustrious predecessors had defied expectations, using their newfound power to fight for the weakest of the galaxy. They had lived underfoot; that experience had driven them to help others.

That fact — and Tyloor’s death, among so many others — was why he had signed the Petition of the 2000 without question. Supreme Chancellor Palpatine had overstepped his bounds, clawing for government rights that had been reserved for the people. And not simply important powers of use in an emergency. No, many of the new measures were simply arbitrary, undoing protections for the weak for no reason at all.

His advisors had told him not to sign the petition. Now, with the Jedi gone and the Empire declared, many of his colleagues had already withdrawn their names. Dewell would not. But he feared that would be the last act of bravery he would ever —

The wretched first officer appeared in the doorway, as drunk as he had been before. "Station stop," he called into the hold. "Cross over to Pad 560 to reach our line's connector flight for the Outer Rim. Everyone else, thanks for..." Dewell didn't hear the rest, reaching down for the bag of belongings at his feet. It was time to move again.

* * *

Dewell didn't know what planet he was on, except that the sky was a bright green, and that again he was having trouble seeing. He was glad to get off the Space Slug, in any event.

He had waited for the Devaronians to disembark first. He hadn't seen where the Young Father had gone. That was too bad; the human had seemed a decent sort. This was how it was going to be, Dewell realized. Going from one place to another, never forming a relationship that lasted more than five minutes, never mind a friendship. It was hardly a life worth living, much less fighting for.

Slouching as he walked across the grungy spaceport, his bag tightly in hand, he looked around at the crowd. He felt eyes on him, and while he couldn't see any faces clearly, he imagined the rest. He spotted a lonely passageway leading between two of the maintenance buildings, and headed toward it. That way he could get to the landing pad while avoiding most of the foot traffic.

Walking down the tiled alley, he heard a bleating cry from around a corner. Instinctively, he stepped forward and looked. A long-trunked Ortolan janitor, still clutching his mop, was being shaken by two figures in white armor. Clone troopers, from the so-called Grand Army of the Republic. Dewell couldn't hear what they were saying, but the stubby blue figure howled as they shook him.

That was enough! Forgetting his size — and everything else that concerned him — Dewell charged into the secluded area. "Stop that!" he yelled. The troopers paid him no mind. The rope wrapped tightly around his paw, Dewell slung his bag of belongings forward. It struck the trooper holding the janitor on the shin.

He had their attention now, whether he wanted it or not. The trooper dropped the Ortolan, who ran off through one of the side passages, abandoning his

cleaning cart and bucket. Pulling a blaster rifle from over his shoulder, the trooper looked directly at the Kedorzhan. “Dewell Bronk?”

Dewell looked up, startled. “That is my name.”

“Senator Bronk, you are under arrest.”

“On whose authority?”

“Emperor Palpatine.” The second trooper held up a datapad with Dewell’s image.

Dewell’s eyes opened to their full, enormous width. Of course, there was no Imperial interest in hassling janitors. At least, not yet. It was a trap, and he had walked right into it. His arms fell to his sides. “I guess I knew this was —”

Before he could finish, something astonishing happened. The janitor’s bucket landed over the helmet of the first clone trooper with a loud clang, spilling sudsy water and completely obscuring the soldier’s vision. The second trooper turned, raising his rifle; surely, it would have taken someone a Wookiees height to shove the bucket over his partner’s head. But there was no one behind him at all. Instead, there was someone to the side — wielding, of all things, a large spray can. As Dewell dove for the ground, he heard the loud spritzing noise and smelled the high-pressure cleanser foam.

Looking up, he saw the comical sight of the trooper, his eye ports and air intakes clogged with the thick goo, moving his rifle in an attempt to fire randomly. But his assailant was on him now, wresting away the weapon. The secluded area was shaded enough that Dewell could make out his rescuer’s identity.

The Young Father!

In one swift move, the human smashed the trooper in the head with the butt of his own rifle. The armored figure stumbled backwards, bumping into his bucket-headed partner. The Young Father shoved at them both now — exactly how, Dewell could not see — pushing them into one of the side doorways. It was a maintenance pit, he realized. He heard the colossal clamor as the armored men tumbled down a staircase.

The Young Father walked over and closed the door, locking it. "They won't be bothering you again, Senator."

Dewell Looked around. "But where..."

The Young Father nodded toward a spot behind him. Stepping forward. Dewell made out the shape of the baby, cradled and resting comfortably atop the Ortolan's janitorial cart. The man lifted the child.

"I believe they've been following you since the Space Slug," the Young Father said. "The Emperor has agents everywhere."

Bronk didn't ask how the man knew. "I don't understand. There are plenty of Kedorzhans — and we mostly look alike. My documents were perfectly forged. Was it the first officer?"

"The Devaronians, I think. Forgeries can get you far — but they knew your reputation for protecting the weak. I suspect they knew you were on the run, and were using that to smoke you out. There, and here." He nodded toward the locked door. "But it's early days for Palpatine's Empire. Next time, it might well be the victim — the Twi'lek woman or the Ortolan janitor — who's the informant."

Dewell shook his head. "It's not in my nature not to trust."

"Mine either," the Young Father said, pulling the child close. He turned and began walking away. "Your next flight is over here," he said. "I'll see you get there."

Bronk followed the short distance across to Pad 560, glad that no one seemed to have noticed the earlier commotion. The starship was little better than Space Slug, but it was outgassing and ready to go, and that made it look heavenly.

Dewell stood near the landing ramp and looked back to the Young Father. "Thank you."

The man simply nodded and started to turn away.

“This is what it’s going to be like, isn’t it?” Dewell asked, looking down at the ground.

The Young Father paused. “How do you mean?”

“Life in hiding. In exile. I’ll need to fear every stranger, every comm connection. I won’t be able to touch a datapad without fear that Palpatine’s cronies are looking in.” Dewell looked up. “I’m exaggerating, right?”

“I’m afraid not,” the man said. He nodded sympathetically. “It will be that way and worse. Things that are basic to your being, things that brought you joy and fulfillment, may become liabilities. Even the thing that defines you — the very desire to help others.”

Dewell looked back at the starship, and then out at the milling blur of passengers, heading this way and that. Gesturing to them, the Young Father continued, keeping his head down. “You’ll think crowds will offer security — but that only works as long as you offer nothing of yourself to anyone. And that’s not the worst thing. Kind acts by others will have to be evaluated with skepticism, and suspicion.” He smiled gently. “Present company excepted.”

Dewell looked down. The man didn’t look familiar — he saw so few human faces clearly that he remembered none of them. But he knew a companion in crisis when he heard one. “It sounds like you’re in the same situation.”

“Not exactly,” the man said. “You have more choices available than I do.”

Dewell stared at the ground for a moment, until he realized what the man meant. “I can’t live in hiding.” Taking a breath, the little Kedorzhan straightened. “I guess I go back.”

The human nodded somberly.

“I’ll have to recant, to declare support for Palpatine.” The words made him feel nauseous as he stepped away from the ramp.

“You’ll be in a better position to help people,” the Young Father said. “That may be the place to be, until people of your strength are called for.”

“Strength!” Dewell laughed. “I’m afraid of every bright light and loud noise.”

“Your strength may surprise you,” the Young Father said, squeezing the bundle he was holding. “Even the smallest among us could change the galaxy.”

“Even your child.”

The Young Father looked down and smiled. “Even he.”

“I hope we don’t have to wait that long,” Dewell said.

“Agreed.” The Young Father nodded. “But I’m prepared to.”

He looked over his shoulder. Across the tarmac, another transport was readying to lift off. “That’s my ride.”

Dewell watched as the man turned. “I’m sorry,” he called. “I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Who I am is no longer important,” the Young Father said, not looking back.

Dewell nodded. “Maybe. But what you do is.” He waved. “Keep doing it... if you can.”

Ben Kenobi: Desert Nomad

The boy is safe. Lars cannot hide his distaste for me, given my connection to the child’s father. Beru, however, is clearly smitten with the infant. But my presence is not welcome in their house. That is fine. I’ll watch over the child from a distance.

But first, I must ready myself. I will build a shelter across the Dune Sea from the Lars homestead. Close enough for me to sense any danger to the boy. Far enough away that the Empire may not discover him if they find me.

Master Yoda’s training was well-advised. I have already established a link with the spirit of my Master, Qui-Gon. His teachings endure from beyond the netherworld of the Force. There is a measure of comfort to be found there. And, someday, when my task is accomplished, I might be able to join him in that place. But for now, I feel old. Old beyond my years. Desert life ages flesh

and spirit, so I can only expect this to worsen the longer I remain on this world. The Tatooine storms will whip me with sands like a scourge. Each night I will hear in the winds the howls of my murdered Jedi kindred.

The Jedi are all but extinct. The few who survived Order 66 are continuously being hunted. Across the galaxy I am certain more will die. When I feel their deaths, I'll dare not reach out to learn who it was, or to assist in any way. If I am discovered, then the boy may be discovered as well. And all will be lost.

I already wrestle with the weariness. The loss of my friend to this evil creature who has replaced him fills me with bitterness. But I must remember the words of my Master: Be mindful of the future, but not at the expense of the moment. The boy is what matters. He IS the future.

Fool. I'm a damned idealistic fool. And blind, too. Anakin's darkness was obvious. I should have foreseen this and prevented it. I failed him. My failure ended the Jedi Order.

The boy is our last hope. I failed Anakin. But I'll not fail Luke. The son of Skywalker must become a Jedi.

The Last One Standing

Sometimes he talked to him in his head. Arguments more furious than the ones they'd had. Talks in which he explained, Master to Padawan, why he'd done what he'd done. Simple words that managed to say everything he'd meant to say, only more clearly than he'd ever been able to say it. In these talks, Anakin listened and understood.

Of course, he was talking to a ghost. Anakin Skywalker was dead.

Obi-Wan Kenobi shut the door of his dwelling on Tatooine and drew his cloak up over his nose and mouth to block the blowing sand. He headed off across the empty dunes. The suns were just rising, but the air still held the night chill.

The galaxy was in the hands of a Sith. The Jedi had been completely destroyed. He would tell himself these things, but there were moments when it all still seemed impossible, even though he'd been in the middle of it. He had seen events firsthand and learned of others as if they were body blows.

Anakin was still alive in Obi-Wan's mind. Obi-Wan was engaged with him so intensely that he expected his apprentice to walk over one of those shifting sand dunes and grin at him again. Or scowl. He'd take anything. Any mood, any defiance. Just to see him again.

Every day and every night he violated every principle the Jedi had taught him about staying in the present moment, about acceptance. Going over every argument, every talk, to find the key that he should have turned in order to unlock the secrets of Anakin's heart.

Why had he turned to the dark side? When did it happen? The Anakin he knew and loved couldn't have done it. Something had twisted in him, and Palpatine had exploited it somehow. Obi-Wan knew it wouldn't change anything to know, but he couldn't help going over the same events, again and again. The chances he'd missed, the things he'd seen, the things he hadn't.

Obi-Wan reached the top of the dunes and began the hike down to the salt flats. He had grown used to land that constantly shifted under his feet. He had learned how to move forward even while the very ground he walked on fought his progress.

Anakin had always hated sand. It was one of the many things about his Padawan that Obi-Wan understood better now that Anakin was dead. That was the horror of losing someone: Understanding came too late.

As a boy, Anakin could walk through a storm of ice pellets so sharp they cut his skin. He could hike kilometer after kilometer in the blaze of three suns. He could plunge into a lake dotted with ice floes ... but he would complain bitterly if he got sand in his boots.

Obi-Wan didn't like the sand, either, but he was grateful for the absence of color. He didn't find the planet beautiful, so at least he felt no loss when he traveled across the landscape. Once he had loved the vivid greens of forests, the deep blues of lakes and seas. Now everything blended into everything else, mesa, cliff, hill, road. There was no vegetation to refresh the eye, no sudden explosions of flowers to startle you into a fresh appreciation of living. He didn't want to appreciate anything. He wanted a place of no color, flat light, dark shadow. It suited him now.

Every sunrise and every dusk he went to the Lars homestead. They did not see him, or, if they did, they did not acknowledge him. He traveled the perimeter, making sure that all was well.

He had only one purpose now.

Luke was a baby in a straw bassinet, who laughed as Beru went about her chores with him strapped to her, nestled in a sling. It was hard to picture that happy baby growing up to be the new hope of the galaxy, but Obi-Wan knew he must trust Yoda.

He waited for Qui-Gon. Yoda had told him that his former Master had been as powerful, as attuned to the Force, as any they had known. Only more so. Qui-Gon now had the ability to transcend death. He had trained with the ancient Whills, and would train Obi-Wan.

But Qui-Gon hadn't spoken to him. There was only the sound of the wind.

Obi-Wan reached out to the Force to find him, but met only the thin stirring of a barren world. It was strange to live in a galaxy now that had no Jedi in it. He hadn't realized that he had once felt a humming presence, alive with the Force-ability of his fellow Jedi. It had fed him, and he hadn't even known it.

Obi-Wan climbed a cliff overlooking the Lars homestead. He knew the routine of Owen Lars, who would wait for first light to check the vaporators. Owen and Beru - Luke slung securely at her side - went out together, he to check the perimeter, she to gather the mushrooms that clung to the moisture that beaded on their exteriors. There was little fresh food on Tatooine, and mushrooms were highly prized.

Beru, of course, was perfectly capable of getting the mushrooms on her own, but Obi-Wan knew why Owen insisted on going with her. It had been on an early-morning mushroom hunt that Anakin's mother, Shmi Skywalker, had been taken by a band of Tusken Raiders. Taken and tortured, for a month. She had died in Anakin's arms. That was all he knew.

Obi-Wan lay flat, far enough away that even Owen's sharp eyes couldn't pick him out, but close enough that he could reach the family should a raiding party appear. Despite the presence of a blaster rifle on Owen's shoulder, Obi-Wan took no chances with Tusken Raiders. They were tribes without mercy or

scruples, who stole what they needed to survive and took pleasure in their brutality.

Obi-Wan sensed something was wrong before Owen did. He reached for the electrobinoculars hanging on his utility belt and raised them to his eyes. He scanned the expanse of sand and salt flats. Something was missing ...

The vaporators. The electrobinoculars jerked as ObiWan searched, moving from one position to another and seeing only clots of sand and a set of snaking bantha tracks. The Tusken Raiders traveled in single file in order to confuse their trackers.

Owen and Beru stood, shoulder to shoulder, looking at the places where their vaporators should have been. The devices were what gave them water, enough to run the farm and enough to sell to keep on going. The loss was a huge blow.

Forsaking his promise not to interfere, Obi-Wan Force-leaped down from the bluff and trudged the last few meters to where Owen and Beru were standing.

He noted how Beru moved a bit closer to Owen and turned slightly, shielding the baby from Obi-Wan. It wasn't that she didn't trust him, exactly. He had delivered Luke to her, placed the baby in her arms. But perhaps the preciousness of that gift made it all the more likely to be taken away, in her mind.

"They're back again," Owen said. "It's them."

He would not speak their name, but Obi-Wan knew he meant the Sand People.

"How many vaporators did you lose?" Obi-Wan asked. His voice cracked like a dry riverbed. He hadn't spoken to anyone in months.

"Maybe twenty," Owen replied.

"Oh, Owen," Beru breathed. "What are we going to do?"

Owen squinted out into the distance. "Get them back."

"No," Beru said. "We'll let them go."

"We can't survive the year without them," Owen said. "Do you want us to starve?"

"We'll find a way," Beru said. "How can you think of going after Sand People, after what they did to your step-mother and your father? I can't lose you, too!"

Cliegg Lars had lost a leg in the attack meant to res-cue Shmi. Obi-Wan knew that he had eventually died of his injuries, later, during the Clone Wars.

"What would you have me do, then?" Owen burst out. His frustration and anger rang in his voice, and Obi-Wan could hear the undertone of panic.

Beru hung on to his arm. "Just let it go," she pleaded. "They've probably already broken them down and sold the parts for scrap to the Jawas."

"And now I'm to buy back my own vaporators?" Owen's mouth was a thin line of determination. "I'll talk to the other farmers. They know that if one of us is hit, we are all in danger. I'll visit every farm today. We'll be off by first light tomorrow."

"You'll start a war."

"A war they began."

Obi-Wan saw the anguish on Beru's face. Despite his courage and resourcefulness, Owen was no match for the Raiders, and she knew it. The lessons Obi-Wan had learned from Qui-Gon flooded into him: how to connect to the Living Force, how to read what someone is feeling.

Look at their eyes, their hands, the way they stand. Listen to what they will not say. Feel the vibration in the Force and read it.

They were desperate and afraid. Young and untried. Cliegg was dead, and he had been the bulwark between them and the harshness of this life. They had not yet found their rhythm here without him. Beru came from three generations of moisture farmers. She knew this life and loved it. Owen had to be strong for her. He could not risk losing the farm. In his fury and resolve he would go too far.

"I can help you," Obi-Wan said.

"Meaning no disrespect, Ben," Owen said, "but I can take care of my own."

Beru slipped her hand into Owen's, and they walked off back toward the homestead.

And if Owen lost his life, Obi-Wan wondered, what would happen to the baby?

Yoda had given him no parameters. Just to protect the child. Make sure he grew to adulthood.

The Tusken Raiders couldn't have gone far. He had a day to act.

He would retrieve the vaporators himself.

Sand People were not easy to track. They moved in single file and used switchbacks, false turns, and seem-ing dead-ends to confuse any trackers. Even though he knew their tricks, Obi-Wan still had trouble following the trail. He kept losing it and having to double back.

It is not the Tusken Raiders that are preventing you. It is your own concentration.

That was what Qui-Gon would tell him, and he would be right.

Obi-Wan came to a canyon that was scored with a series of twisting dry riverbeds. While his eyes searched the ground for every sign of disturbed pebble or partially obliterated bantha hoof-print, part of his mind drifted to the past.

Anakin had done exactly this. He had successfully tracked the band of Raiders who had kidnapped his mother, even though Shmi had been held for so long. He had found her, but too late. He had brought her dead body back to the Lars homestead.

What else had he done there? Obi-Wan didn't know. He knew only from that day on, a shadow began to engulf

Anakin, something Obi-Wan couldn't penetrate. He had tried to talk to Anakin about it, but his Padawan had brushed off his questions. He realized now that

Anakin had begun to confide in Padmé instead. They had married in secret, and the marriage had been part of the reason Obi-Wan had felt a divide between him and his Padawan. If Anakin had told him of the marriage, he would have understood. Not approved, but understood.

He had been tempted once, too. He had loved, too. If only Anakin had confided in him.

If only ...

And why hadn't he? Because Obi-Wan had failed him. If he'd been a better Master, if he'd had more of Qui-Gon's kindness and wisdom ... Anakin might have approached him, have felt free to say whatever he was thinking or feeling ...

If ...

They had flown together, wingtip to wingtip. They had relied on each other. He was more daring when Anakin was with him. Anakin had taught him how to take risks.

But in the end he had lost everything.

I hate you! Anakin had screamed at him on the volcanic slope. Writhing in pain on the black sand while the lava river burned behind them.

That was where Obi-Wan kept returning. That vision of hatred. Because no matter how Palpatine had corrupted Anakin, no matter how the dark side had taken him over, no matter what decisions he'd made in his heat and his fury, he was Obi-Wan's apprentice and he ended by hating his Master. And that was a Master's failing.

The landscape faded and Obi-Wan saw the black ash of Mustafar. He tasted ash in his mouth and fire in his lungs.

He had never expected, in all his missions, in all his wanderings, to taste the depth of this kind of failure, the agony of this grief.

He could see the moons rising. He knew he was close, but now it would be too dark to track. Obi-Wan stopped and looked up in frustration at the first star

overhead. It was then that he heard it ... a soft sound, a high sound ... children calling.

He dropped to his knees and took shelter behind a rock. He could hear the children of the Sand People, called Uli-ah, running, sticks in their hands. They pretended the sticks were gaderffi, the poles the Tusken used as weap-ons. One end a deadly spike dipped in venom, the other a spiked club. With guttural cries, the children used the rock he crouched behind as target practice. He could feel the shudder of the blows through the solid rock. He understood why the Sand People were such fierce fighters. They trained, from the time they could walk, how to kill.

Obi-Wan followed the Uli-ah at a distance and, after scrambling over a dune, he saw the camp. The urtya tents, made of animal skins and sticks, formed a circle. Off to one side, banthas were tethered to poles fashioned of scrap metal.

The Raiders were noted for their skills as sentries. They knew when someone was approaching their camp. No one knew whether it was their sense of smell, or their sight, or an ability to divine changes in the air currents, or some extrasensory ability. But a Jedi knew how to walk the world lightly, to move through air and on ground with-out leaving a trace. Obi-Wan was just another shadow in the dusk.

The smells and sounds of the preparation of the eve-ning meal came to him. Good. They would be distracted. The Sand People weren't sociable, even amongst them-selves. Each family retreated to their own tent. There they ate their meal and then retired.

He had learned about the Sand People shortly after he'd arrived. The men fought. The women kept the camp. They did not invite each other into family tents. Their need for concealment was close to a mania. If skin were exposed on a Tusken Raider, he would be banished or killed. So at this time they wouldn't be wandering. Families would be secluded.

Obi-Wan moved from shelter to shelter, treading lightly. If the vaporators were still intact, he hoped he would be lucky and they would be out in the open and unguarded.

But he was not lucky. He spied a sentry in front of one of the tents.

He pressed himself against the skin of the tent and activated his lightsaber. He felt the hum in his hand, the familiar heft. He sliced through the back and stepped through.

Spoils from raids littered the tent, bundles of cloth, metal, a droid half-dismantled for parts. The vaporators were stacked in the middle of the tent. Obi-Wan let out a slow breath. They hadn't been dismantled. He was in luck.

He didn't want to fight a battle. He wanted only to get the vaporators out of here. But he needed a bantha to carry them. The thing about banthas was, you couldn't count on them to keep their mouths shut.

He'd have to take the chance.

The banthas were tethered twenty meters away. Slipping through the shadows, he approached them. He watched them for a moment, letting the Force work. He picked out a bantha and put a hand on its flank. He felt it shudder, then relax. He dipped into his pocket for the lichen he had picked on the way and fed the beast.

Then he led it back, closer to the tent. He should be able to load all the vaporators on one beast. Luckily ban-thas were capable of carrying heavy burdens.

Boldness. That's what Anakin would encourage.

Moving swiftly, Obi-Wan transported the vaporators, four at a time, into the satchels that were slung over the bantha's back. He did not make a sound. The bantha stayed quiet as he fed him more bits of lichen from his pocket.

He was almost done when the Force warned him, surging an alarm. Behind him the gaderffi moved, the spiked club end headed for his skull. Obi-Wan leaped to one side, his lightsaber activated and in his hand. He struck the gaffi stick and turned it into splinters of smoking horn and metal. The Tusken Raider let out a howl of fury and challenge.

The cry was picked up by others.

The men ran out of their tents. Obi-Wan spun in a slow circle. They raised their gaderffi above their heads, crying the terrible howl that could freeze the blood in anyone unlucky enough to be within its hearing.

He could read their confidence in their identical stances. They didn't need to hurry. It was one lone figure against many. They had him. They would enjoy this.

Then with astonishing speed, they came at him. The gaffi sticks whirled. He jumped and twisted, his lightsaber coming down again and again, whirling in an arc of light. He flipped, his boots connecting with a Raider, who went over with a strangled cry of rage. As he went down, Obi-Wan grabbed the gaffi stick.

He was more than they had bargained for, but they weren't daunted. He could smell their bloodlust. He was only enraging them.

Obi-Wan's fighting style had always been about evasion and disguise. His most successful battles were based on his ability to, deflect attack and surprise his opponent. He rarely depended on brute strength to achieve victory.

Anakin had taught him about aggression.

He knew this was what the Tusken Raiders would understand. They understood necessity; they lived by it. They did not farm or make things or buy things. They attacked and they stole, and they survived.

Time slowed down. He looked into their faces, obscured by their intentionally terrifying headgear. Round dark holes for eyes, mouths composed of metal shards around a gaping gash. Not a speck of skin or flesh to be seen. That would soften them too much, make them look like living beings, connect them, somehow, to the life-forms around them. They wanted to be distinct. They wanted to look like walking death.

Loathing choked him. The Sand People made nothing and gave back nothing. They merely preyed on the weak. The moisture farmers, who worked backbreaking days, were attacked on raids that often resulted in death and complete destruction. Stealing the vaporators from Owen and Beru's farm would bring on terrible hardship.

They had tortured Anakin's mother for a month. Just to test her resolve. Was it any wonder that Anakin had been left with such a deep, festering wound?

He could do this for Anakin. His Padawan was dead, his brother, his son, his friend. He could give him this. A fear-some anger unleashed. Vengeance. Vengeance against the beings in the world with so much darkness inside them that life meant nothing to them. They swallowed life and hope. That was what the Sith counted on, beings like these.

They had taken over the galaxy. They had won.

But not here. Not today.

He stopped. His stillness intrigued them. He held his lightsaber in a way that any Jedi would recognize as the beginning of aggression. He had no hesitation, no doubt that he could vanquish them all, destroy this camp and destroy every breath of life in it.

He felt his anger rise, and he took pleasure in it. It was growing inside him and obliterating everything else. He wanted to be overtaken. He didn't want to be careful. He wanted only the white heat of satisfaction.

Do not become your enemy.

Qui-Gon was like static in his brain. He didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to remember him right now.

But the memory was too strong.

Qui-Gon's compassion had been infinite. His Master had been impatient, to be sure. He could be brusque. But his connection to the Living Force had never faltered. He did not take away life if there was an alternative.

The alternative.

What had Qui-Gon always said? If you know their weak-ness, you can defeat your enemy. Expose them for what they are.

The anger was still there, but he turned his face away from it. He reached out for what he knew and treasured - the Force. It was here, even in this place of darkness, of grasping evil. He soared above the heads of the Tusken

Raiders, enraging them. They swiped at him with their gaderffi, missing him by a centimeter of grace.

He called on the Force and it moved around him, propelling him over the tents. As he flew over their tops, he slashed down with his lightsaber, one, two, three times, then landed and leaped again. The tents collapsed in a gust and a clatter of sticks.

Women and children blinked. Some of the women weren't wearing their face masks or their gloves. They shrieked and clawed at the sand, trying to bury them-selves. Some threw tarps over their children. They moaned and howled with the shame of their unmasking.

Obi-Wan landed. He took advantage of the stunned reaction of the men. Using the gaderffi stick he'd pried from the hands of a Tusken Raider, he charged forward, slashing at utility belts and face masks. In his hands the stick became as elegantly precise as a med droid's scal-pel. Sandshrouds peeled back, skulls were exposed, fingers, limbs.

They couldn't fight now. Their centuries of rules and rituals defeated their need to strike. Exposure meant death. The men ran to their tents to protect their women, to find cover.

Obi-Wan knew he was now more than an opponent who dared to invade the camp. He'd become something supernatural, a wraith that had blown away the conceal-ment they prized, fiercer than any wind. He had no doubt the news of this would spread among the tribes. Perhaps it would buy him a mystique that would offer him a degree of protection. They'd be wary of him now.

He leaped onto the bantha and urged it into a gallop, the cries of the exposed echoing in his ears.

He brought Lars and Beru the vaporators that night.

He wasn't expecting anything, but the coolness of Owen's response did surprise him. His face was stony as he looked at the vaporators. Beru hung

back. He could see the battle of emotions on her face from the light of the open homestead door. She was relieved that Owen would not have to fight, but she didn't want to owe Ben Kenobi a favor.

"I told you to stay out of it," Owen said.

"It was something I could do," Obi-Wan answered.

"It's not that we're not grateful," Beru said. "It's that ... "

"We can take care of our own farm," Lars completed. "We're a family here."

They stood close together, Luke between them, nestled against Beru's body. Obi-Wan saw with sudden clarity the baby's fingers, small and perfect. His mouth opened and he gave a baby sound, something like a whimper, a sound Obi-Wan didn't know how to interpret. The Living Force was one thing. Babies were quite another.

Beru extended a finger, and Luke grasped it, making, this time, a sound Obi-Wan recognized as contentment.

"I'll be going," Obi-Wan said.

Stiffly, Owen Lars inclined his head. "Thank you," he said gruffly.

Obi-Wan turned his back on the open door. He climbed out of the homestead and trudged away. The sand sucked at his boots. He felt the wind pick up in the sudden way he'd become accustomed to on Tatooine.

Sand pelted his cheeks. This was his life now. To protect a baby who didn't know him, might never know him. To have no one by his side, ever again. To be Master to none, to have his life linked to no one.

To coexist with memories that he could not live with. To have the memory of Anakin be like living fire in his gut.

To get up every day, to stand, to watch, to live, when so many had died.

And keep on walking.

Grand Moff Tarkin's Data Journal

To: His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Palpatine

From: Governor Tarkin, Seswenna Sector, Eriadu

Regarding: Increasing the security of the Empire

Your Majesty:

It has recently come to my attention that what had previously been the quiet grumbling of malcontents on backwater worlds has become dissidence in more civilized systems. Your Majesty will forgive me if I am repeating found less rumors, but I have heard there is even armed defiance in some sectors.

Coupled with increased resistance to your plans from hot-headed young senators, this situation has given me pause to think about our long term security arrangements. I myself have been frustrated chasing pirate bands in my sector, only to have them leap deep into a neighboring sector where my forces cannot follow without running into conflict with another Moft. If the scattered armed resistance should become organized, it will doubtless follow the example of its criminal brethren. Granting any rebel group the advantage of elusiveness is foolhardy at best. At worst, it could lead to our destruction.

Even the excellent pace with which His Majesty is increasing the size of the Imperial Fleet can scarcely hope to provide all-encompassing security should a significant number of planets decide to defy your New Order. We are years perhaps decades – away from a force vast enough to secure every system and every world simultaneously.

Therefore, I present the following recommendations for your consideration:

- To provide a swift, systematic response to rebellion as it appears and before it has time to entrench, I suggest the formation of Oversectors - sectors consisting of systems in which rebellion is newly born, or systems which maintain frequent contact with systems in chronic unrest. These Oversectors would be formed without regard to current sector boundaries. With the freedom to cross outdated political borders, Oversector forces would be able to respond to threats quickly, while they are still small and manageable. Liquidating a dozen small threats is easier than rooting out one well-established center of defiance. As an Oversector is created only across

problem sectors, they must be given a greater quantity of forces than a normal sector. Three Sector Groups should suffice.

- Command of an Oversector should be given to a single individual who reports directly to His Majesty. This will bypass any delays caused by political opportunism in your advisors.
- Cannibalize existing holonet transceivers, modify them, and put them in the flagship of every Sector Group in an Oversector command. Place similar facilities within His Majesty's command ship and within the Royal Palaces of Imperial City. This will enable forces to respond to threats almost as quickly as they are reported. Imperial forces will be able to coordinate to a degree impossible among an enemy whose fastest means of communication is an ever-changing rendezvous point somewhere in the galaxy.
- Rule through the fear of force rather than through force itself. If we use our strength wisely, we shall cow thousands of worlds with the example of a select few. These examples would need to be highly visible worlds, whose punishment would be further revealed through our control of information via the hyper media.

Your Majesty, it has long been my contention that your New Order needs one undeniable and overwhelming symbol to impress and, yes, frighten the masses. The average citizen has no grasp of numbers nor a head for calculation. I maintain that the effectiveness of the Star Destroyer stems from not only its massive firepower, but from its size. When citizens look at a Star Destroyer and then compare it to the craft which might be mustered to attack it, they have a tendency to dismiss such a notion as suicidal rather than approach the problem tactically. This natural state can be exploited to a far greater degree, as the average citizen deals in symbols, not rational analysis. If we present the galaxy with a weapon so powerful, so immense as to defy all conceivable opposition against it, a weapon invulnerable and invincible in battle, then that weapon shall become the symbol of the Empire. We need only a handful, perhaps as few as one, of these weapons to subjugate a thousand thousand worlds. It must have force enough to dispatch an entire system, power enough to shatter planets. The fear such a weapon will inspire will be great enough for you to rule the galaxy unchallenged. What do you need with

the Senate when you can give direct control of territories to your hand-picked regional governors? Sweep away the last remnants of the Old Republic and let fear keep the local systems in line - fear of our ultimate weapon.

I am ready to begin work to implement these steps at your word.

* * *

To: Governor Moff Tarkin

From: Imperial Advisor Ars Dangor, for the Emperor

Regarding: The Tarkin Doctrine

You have read correctly, valued servant. Everything you have suggested will be implemented in a policy to be officially known as the Tarkin Doctrine. Rule through fear instead of through idealistic government agencies has a satisfying appeal to the Emperor. As such, the following title is bestowed upon you immediately, along with all relevant powers pertaining to such.

- You are now Grand Moff Tarkin, the first of a new order of Imperial officials.
- You have complete authority and control of Oversector Outer, which includes most of the sectors considered the Outer Rim Territories.
- You are to implement under extreme secrecy the design and construction of your ultimate tool of fear, code-named the Death Star Project.
- You have command of four Sector Groups to use to maintain the peace and to provide security for the Death Star Project.

The Emperor is pleased, Grand Moff Tarkin. Do not disappoint him.

The Living Force Campaign Vignettes

Two Heads Aren't Better Than One

Many years ago, before Cloud Mountain erupted, raining fire upon the forest and scattering kilassin and tarasin alike in all directions, a broader variety of creatures roamed the jungles of Cularin. Some disappeared entirely when the fire rained down, but others simply relocated. One such creature was the dua-wurm.

"If you'd told me b'fore I come to Cularin that I'd be livin' on a planet where there's seventy different kinds of lizards walking the jungles, some of 'em on two legs, and where there's ugly Hutt-lookin' two-headed purple wurms wandering the mines, why, I'd have told ya you were crazier than a Jedi with a lightsaber toothpick. But here I am, workin' the mines and tryin' my best to figure out how a pile of rock this big can't have nothing but plain old dirt on the inside. Two, three more months is all our backers are givin' us. 'Course, if we don't have nothing by then, it won't much matter, since the blasted wurms ate another work crew this morning. There's something wrong with this here mountain. You just mark my words . . ."

-- Gerell Yok'Ril, Proprietor, Sunburst Mining, holorecording

Tales of Nub Saar

One of the greatest tragedies in the early efforts to colonize Cularin was the floating city of Nub Saar. This documentary speculates on what forces (other than the radiation storms for which Genarius is famous) might have played a role in the destruction of the city.

Camera crews are not allowed on the floating city of Nub Saar. "Safety" is the only reason given when anyone questions why this is the case. As such, a great deal of the footage utilized in the making of this documentary has been reconstructed from still images taken from the archives of the Jedi Academy on Almas and from other historical documents archived throughout the system. The algorithms used to re-create critical events at Nub Saar are accurate insofar as key variables (e.g., currents in the atmosphere of Genarius) are

understood and capable of being tracked through the historical record. It is clearly impossible to include every possible variable in such algorithms, and to the extent that we failed to consider all elements of the environment, the accuracy of our depiction will suffer. We ask viewers to retain an open mind in spite of this unavoidable shortcoming of this documentary effort.

Hello. My name is Dazen Mok. A year ago, I left my studies at the Jedi Academy on Almas to pursue a career researching the history of the Cularin system. This research represented a passion I could not release. Not everyone is cut out to be a Jedi, and while I salute my former companions in the Order, I believe I have chosen correctly.

The research that demonstrated to me that my commitment lay to areas of study outside the purview of the Jedi Order had to do with Nub Saar, and the circumstances surrounding the disappearance and presumed death of the original settlers of that floating city.

A still image appears of a floating city within the clouds of Genarius. A radiation storm covers the upper portions of the city. Bolts of blue and orange light stretch between the superstructures, grisly metal frames like glowing droid skeletons among the clouds.

The commonly accepted wisdom about Nub Saar is that it was an unfortunate learning experience for those who wanted to "settle" Genarius. That is, there is a point in the atmosphere beneath which it is unsafe to build. While gravity may allow for the existence of structures beneath that point, the radiation storms are intense enough that anything not constructed to withstand the forces of, say, hyperspace travel, will not be able to hold together.

I became convinced, after working on a research project for a class in dark side phenomena at the academy, that this explanation was both technically correct and overly simplistic. I will first present my reasoning why it is overly simplistic -- that is, what it leaves out -- and then I'll present simulations and the results of a number of interviews with individuals who claim to have been to Nub Saar and explored some of its surface levels to support my thesis.

You may notice that even though I'm no longer a Jedi, there is still a strong emphasis on the Force as an explanation for Nub Saar. The fact that I chose to turn in my lightsaber in no way implies that I would deny that the Force does, in fact, permeate all things. It must be at the core of any explanation we offer for something we don't understand, because it is demonstrably at the core of

any explanation for things we do understand. I make no apologies for this perspective, as it is the only one I have, and I believe it to be the only useful, healthy way to try to understand our galaxy.

The same image of the city, shrouded in a brilliant radiation storm, reappears on the screen. Then the clouds begin to swirl, the arcs of energy ripping and jerking from one frame to another, and the city's foundation shaking. At the bottom of the screen appear the words, "Probabilistic re-enactment" appear. We hear Mok in voice-over as the storm pounds relentlessly on Nub Saar.

Many of us have experienced the radiation storms of Genarius. I myself was on Tolea Biqua almost two years ago when a radiation storm threatened to wipe the city out entirely as the shields almost failed. Tolea Biqua still exists, though, as it has since it was constructed. Its shields have not failed, but if they had during any of the many radiation storms it's weathered, everyone who lives on the city would have been killed. Every man, woman, and child would have perished.

The image shifts to a man on the streets of Tolea Biqua, standing in front of "Riboga's Barge," the famous cantina. He shakes his head. "Never happen. See, thing is, we're far enough out that we don't gotta worry about getting fried like that. Nub Saar, that was just bad planning. Way too far in. Too close to the planet core." His image fades, and we again see Mok. Now he's seated at a desk, hands folded in front of him.

This is a common interpretation. But consider this.

He presses a button on the desk and a holographic image of Genarius appears, rotating in front of him. A bright red spot glows within its clouds.

This is the location of Nub Saar. Please note its proximity to the core of Genarius. Now, let's take a look at Tolea Biqua.

Another glowing spot appears. It's on the opposite side of the planet from Nub Saar, but is almost the same distance from the planet's core as the red spot.

If you read published materials on Nub Saar, you might have learned that the difference in altitude between Tolea Biqua and Nub Saar is 2,313 kilometers. My own research has determined this to be inaccurate. The actual difference between Tolea Biqua's distance to the core of Genarius and Nub Saar's is 2,313

meters. Less than three kilometers. Proximity enough seems unlikely to be the sole cause of the disturbance at Nub Saar.

The difference is that one of the cities came first, and the city that came first, for lack of a better word, awoke something deep within the clouds. I'm not talking about the cochlera, either. I'm talking about something much darker, much angrier. It awoke something I believe to be akin to a manifestation of the dark side of the Force.

Like many of you, I've heard stories about what happened when a fallen Jedi named Karae Nalvas created his own floating fortress deep within the clouds of Genarius, with hopes to conquer the other cities and potentially drop Genarius into a civil war.* He both built and populated it at a deeper level than Nub Saar was built at, yet he managed to build it successfully. It was only through the intervention of the heroes of Cularin that he failed to accomplish his goals. When his fortress of Conkesta was destroyed, those who were responsible for bringing an end to Nalvas's plans report a burst of dark side energy much greater than anything the fallen Jedi himself could have hoped to control. Whatever it is that destroyed Nub Saar, I believe that it actually helped Nalvas create his fortress.

If this sounds like the kind of story you might tell a child to scare him into behaving, that's because it is. There is something within Genarius that we do not understand, cannot control, and *must not trust*. The explanation that the radiation storms destroyed Nub Saar is overly simplistic because it does nothing to explain where the radiation storms *come from*. Storms do not simply begin for no reason, any more than a lightsaber can ignite for no reason. There must be a trigger. Something must change the way the Force flows through the lightsaber in order to ignite it, and something must change how the Force flows through the clouds to bring about a storm like the one that destroyed Nub Saar, or the one that threatened to destroy Tolea Biqua. Destruction is the way of the dark side. As such, it can only be the dark side itself -- manifested in the experience of those who assisted in the destruction of Conkesta -- that caused the city of Nub Saar to fail, and that killed all who were on the city when the storm hit.

I'd like to conclude with commentary from an individual who has been to Nub Saar twice, on exploratory missions. She chose to retain her anonymity, since visiting Nub Saar may not be illegal but is extremely inadvisable. This has become even more pronounced with the regular appearance of Cularin Militia

patrols in the area surrounding Nub Saar. The individual with whom I spoke was actually almost captured by the Militia on her last visit to the city, but even without that close call, she would have been unlikely to return again in the future. I'll let you hear it in her own words.

Mok disappears and we see the silhouette of what is probably a Human female. When she speaks, her voice has the characteristic rattle-grind of having been masked.

I've seen a lot of strange things, been to a lot of unpleasant places. Back before the Jedi started protecting it the way they do now, I once made it into the upper levels of the Sith fortress on Almas. That's about the only place I've ever been that feels more wrong than Nub Saar.

It's like, you step on the place, and you can tell there's been a lot of dying. But it's not just something in the past. It's like, there's still dying going on. It's like you're standing in a room with someone, and their respirator is failing, and you watch it keep getting slower and slower. But it never quite stops. They're dying, but they can't finish, so they're always on the brink, not really alive, not really dead.

That's what Nub Saar feels like. It's like you're in a place that's almost dead, that wants to be dead, but that isn't being allowed to die. Because that fear, that adrenaline of the last fight against death -- something is using it.

I went into Nub Saar the first time looking for loot. I went in the second time looking for answers. If I went in again, I don't think I'd come back out. I don't think it would let me go.

The screen goes black. Then the words, "For more information, please visit the following holonet nodes..." appear, followed by a series of addresses that scroll past rapidly, then are gone.

* This refers to events in the now-retired **Living Force** trilogy "Clouds of Genarius,"

The Sivulliq Is Out There -- Somewhere

{transmission origination node: Private729, Edic Bar, SoroSuub registry F2UUB}

For Immediate Release:

Miim Te'Suub, Director of Formal Activities for the SoroSuub corporation on Edic Bar, is pleased to announce that the gratitude of SoroSuub and all of her subsidiaries is upon the brave citizens of Cularin. In recent weeks, threats to the well-being of the SoroSuub corporation have availed themselves of the cover supplied by the generous and most colorful clouds of Genarius. It was only through the concerted efforts of the brave citizens of Cularin that these threats were averted, and for that we are extremely grateful.

It was also our distinct pleasure to learn that the brave citizens of Cularin had retrieved at no small peril a prototype freighter stolen two months past from SoroSuub's facilities on Edic Bar. Much was our shame at such a theft, and much was our joy at the return of the freighter, designation *Sivulliq*, class RK-720 light transport. Due to changes in our production line, however, it no longer behooved SoroSuub corporation to place into production such a fine piece of technology, and it would have been most woefully wasteful to dispose of the freighter. It seemed a fine opportunity to reward the brave citizens of Cularin for their efforts, so shortly after the freighter was returned to our generous and delighted hands, our crews began work on repairing the damage to the ship, and it was given into the possession of one of the selfsame brave citizens of Cularin who wrested it from its thieves, a young pilot who has asked to remain nameless for the time being.

It is with sincere gratitude that we announce this transfer of ownership, and we wish the young pilot nothing but the best. If negotiations go well, you may see this brave citizen of Cularin in an upcoming SoroSuub holovid.

Be well, Cularin, and many thanks from the SoroSuub corporation.

Liriana: Dark Force Witch of Cularin

For several seconds, your screen remains blank. Then it flickers, and the image of an aged Tarasin appears on your datapad, staring out at you with wise, peaceful eyes. She blinks, as if trying to see those who would view her face across the miles, and then a serene smile spreads across her features.

"I am Dariana, Mother of the Hiironi. It is possible we have met before. That you are viewing this -- I believe Na'Ilia referred to it as a chip - at all indicates

that you are one of those who has demonstrated a willingness to assist Cularin and her people in times of crisis. I fear such a time is nearly upon us.

"For years, I have worked to hold back a great evil that seeks to wash over our beautiful planet, to despoil that which I have sought to preserve, to subjugate those who I would keep free. It has taken much of my strength, and now, aged as I am, I fear that my strength may not hold out much longer. My body grows weak, and I am tired, and a great sleep calls to me from just beyond the horizon. I do not know how long I will remain among you before I move on and become one with the Force. With this in mind, I have prepared this chip to alert you, and those like you, to the dangers that will need to be faced with my passing.

"I have read everything the offworlders have written about the Tarasin. Read it, and approved of it, but it never came close to the truth in some areas."

She pauses as a coughing fit racks her body. Two young female Tarasins move in to either side of her and support her shoulders as she hacks, and after a few seconds, the coughing subsides. She looks up at the recording unit once more.

"The Tarasin have ever been portrayed as a peaceful species, with the only blemish on our kind being the uprising so many years ago. Even that could have been avoided, was it not for the Wyrđ. The Wyrđ is a group of Tarasin, naturally attuned to the Force, who draw upon its power to fuel their anger, their rage, their hatred. They prey on the weak and the fearful, and exploit them to their own ends.

"When I was young, before my eleventh naming day, I was approached by a member of the Wyrđ. She sought to bring me into their fold, sensing in me some degree of power with the Force. I declined. It was not the way my mother taught me, nor the way the Mother of the Hiironi taught any of us. It promised power, but too quickly, and too easily, and I swore that I would never be taken in by those promises.

"You see, the member of the Wyrđ who approached me was my older sister, Liriana. Nearly a decade before, she was ostracized from the Hiironi irstat, sent into the jungles for betraying the trust of our people. Her banishment crushed my mother, who cried every night for three years at the thought of her eldest daughter, lost to our ways and exploring the darkness of the forest - for you see, there are many dark places on Cularin, places strong in the dark side, and these are the places the Wyrđ will congregate. It was known to us, when she

left, that she sought the Wyrđ, but we did not know whether she had succeeded until she came to find me. Secrecy and stealth have ever been their way."

Dariana pauses and takes a drink of a strange, syruplike orange beverage before handing it to someone just out of the recorder's range.

"I promised my mother that I would never betray our people in the way my sister had, and that I would always protect the Hiironi, and the Tarasin, from the dark influence of the Wyrđ. As the cities of the offworlders grew, so did my commitment to protect innocents from the Wyrđ, and so did my own capabilities begin to lessen.

"The Wyrđ, though, continues to grow.

"For the last half-decade, I have put all of my energy into holding them back, keeping them from overrunning Cularin and using it for their own nefarious purposes. Because I know my sister and understand how her mind works in ways that would be impossible for another to comprehend, I have been successful, though not without the assistance of the other irstats. I have to wonder if my passing will mark a turning point . . . but it is not something that can be helped, if it is the will of the Force.

"Liriana now commands the Wyrđ. She is nearly my equal in strength, but she lacks any compunction about utilizing her powers with the Force for ill ends. I do not fear her, nor do I fear what she may do, nor do I fear for the people of Cularin - because any of those fears would force me to play into her hands. I know the people of Cularin - Tarasin and offworlder alike - and I believe, in my heart, that there is no challenge they cannot overcome. But to overcome the challenge, one must first know of it. Now you know.

"Be wary of Liriana and her Wyrđ. They possess strange powers, ones that many have never seen before. They fly, unaided, and when they are chased by individuals in ships, they land and summon storms to bring the ships crashing down. They walk the branches of the trees as lithely as umo lizards, utilizing their natural camouflage to catch wandering prey unawares. They are the antithesis of everything I stand for, everything I believe to be right, and it troubles me that I have been unable to stop the Wyrđ totally in my lifetime.

"This, then, is my task to you. Protect Cularin. Protect her peoples. And beware the Wyrd, for you will not know they are coming until they are already upon you.

"May the Force be with you all."

And with that, your datapad screen goes blank.

No Droids for You!

DROID PRODUCTION ON UFFEL HALTED!

For several days, that headline streamed across datapads throughout Cularin, with little in the way of explanation. Only an announcement from Gor Kolomo, the Twi'lek proprietor of the droid moon, that due to "circumstances beyond our control," no new droids would be forthcoming for some time.

Theories regarding the reason behind the shutdown abound. They range from the mundane -- scheduled maintenance -- to the exotic -- the moon has been overrun by a space-going variety of womp-rats who shoot ion beams from their eyes. Whatever the reason, the production stoppage has already begun to affect Cularin's economy.

With so much of the everyday labor handled by droids in many parts of the system, work has slowed -- and in some areas, ground to a halt. Droids, ever a high-maintenance investment, have been breaking down as frequently as ever, but many of the Uffel-sponsored repair facilities are so backlogged as to quadruple turnaround time on even the simplest work orders. This bottleneck has led many to question whether the Uffel facility has called back its technicians for on-site work, rather than leaving them in their remote locations to provide service. This would tend to indicate a somewhat more drastic circumstance than Kolomo has thus far admitted in his brief holo-conferences.

Several unlicensed technicians have begun offering increased service to Uffel droids. Unfortunately, the safety precautions built into the Uffel models seem to be the one element of their design impervious to wear and tear. In the past four days, 17 unlicensed technicians have been injured while attempting to disassemble Uffel droids; no fatalities have yet been reported.

After the 14th such injury, Kolomo held a brief holo-conference. A transcription of his comments follows.

"People of Cularin, the management of the Uffel facility sincerely apologizes for the inconvenience posed by our recent inactivity. We are in the process of making adjustments within our facilities and ask that you be patient. Our technical staff and crew are working around the clock to return our three primary lines to full functionality. Once the MSF, protocol, and military lines are operable again, we foresee less than a week's delay in providing for the needs of all of you who have waited so patiently."

As with all of Kolomo's conferences, no questions were allowed, and his image blinked out almost before the last words left his lips.

Ships from various trade houses around Genarius have taken up orbits above the X2-4 droid production facility on Uffel's surface to monitor activity. To all appearances, the droids on the moon are working around the clock, as Kolomo claimed. Much of their activity, though, seems to take place outside the walls of X2-4. Several large, relatively recent craters have been spotted on the moon's surface, and droid activity seems particularly heavy around those, though no life forms have yet been spotted on Uffel.

With any luck, more useful information -- or at least, more droids -- will be forthcoming from Uffel shortly.

Over Thaere

The Early Stages

Several routes lead to the fringes of Cularin, but the primary trade route opens from hyperspace into the nearby Thaereian system. For many years, Thaere - a system of three planets and a dying yellow star - served as little more than a stopover on the Corellian Spine, with almost nothing to distinguish it from any of a thousand other star systems. Over the course of the past half-century, though, the growing lawlessness of Cularin has forced the development of an exceptionally strong military on Thaere Privo, the central planet in the system, as well as on the two outlying planets and one moon. The pirates of Cularin learned quickly that there was no easy bounty from their neighbors.

The relations of the Thaereian establishment with Cularin have traditionally been strained, since, depending on the individuals in power, Thaere has tended to levy steep excise taxes on goods passing through its bases. Because of the relative inconvenience of Thaere to most of the other stops on the route

(primarily only smaller cruisers and cargo ships need to stop at Thaere's bases), goods could sometimes sit in storage for months, costing their owners more and more money without any return on investment.

Reign of the Hutt

For most trading houses, shipments through Thaere Privo sped up remarkably while Riboga was in power in Cularin. It was never exactly clear how closely Riboga affiliated himself with the two females who ruled Thaere Privo during that time -- the sisters Mala and Aola Blen, a pair of Twi'leks. Mala, the older, often expressed disdain for the Hutt establishment in public, while Aola often came across as subservient. Rumor has it that their private personas were the exact opposite, with Mala sometimes traveling to Riboga's court for extended visits for which she would bring all manner of delicacies to feed Riboga by hand. Aola never traveled past the bounds of the Cularin system. Close aides claim that she didn't trust Riboga at all, and if she couldn't be within a hundred meters of a ship that could go to hyperspace and get her a few parsecs away, she wouldn't even see him.

Both of them amused Riboga to no end. He would offer support to one, and then the other, watching the balance of power shift in Thaere. That instability made it impossible for the Thaereian Navy to police the borders of the system as thoroughly as it could otherwise, and allowed Riboga's ships freer passage through the region.

This was further enabled by a rather amicable relationship established between Riboga and Colonel Jir Tramsig during the latter years of Riboga's reign. Tramsig was assigned to freighter escort duty shortly after completing his training, and the escort on which he was serving was attacked and crippled by a band of smugglers running for the Outer Rim. Most of the command crew of the escort shuttle was killed, the weapon systems disabled, and the life support malfunctioning. With only 10 percent power to the sublight engines, Tramsig attempted to bring the shuttle in to Thaere Privo, but it died completely a few hundred kilometers out of orbit. As the life support systems shut down, one of Riboga's vessels pulled alongside and offloaded the crew.

Later, when he thought no one was listening and he'd had far too much wine, Tramsig would sometimes be heard wondering aloud whether Riboga had set the whole thing up. But he never said such things until well after Nirama took power.

Enter Nirama

Nirama's relations with Thaere were very different than Riboga's. When Riboga left Cularin, he took with him many of the defenses and much of the reputation. The small pirate population, which had until now subsisted on passing freighters, began to look seriously at Nirama's operation, and the only meaningful force that he could find outside of his own (and he didn't want to send his own men and women out pirate-hunting) was the Thaereian Navy.

Riboga's contacts remained in power in Thaere, though the Twi'lek sisters met with untimely deaths after Riboga's departure. This paved the way for Bal Ferensil, a Bothan of middle years, to ascend to the top of Thaere's political ranks.

The machinations that went on next remain unclear, but as Cularin was gaining its voice in the Senate, Thaere was establishing military fortifications in strategic locations throughout Cularin, including on the jungle world itself. These fortifications were constructed with the consent of the governments of Cularin, as a means of dealing with the pirate infestation.

For their part, the pirates didn't seem to notice, or if they did, to care. What had looked like a situation that could result in a bigger cut of the system for them was suddenly back to normal. As long as they didn't go out of their way to create more trouble than they had before, nothing happened. The Thaereian Navy seemed to be enjoying the opportunity for some rest and relaxation.

And So It Goes

The presence of the Thaereian military in Cularin remains minimal, though they make no secret of their role in the system. They are present for the good of Cularin, to ensure fair, free trade through Thaere Privo. The increased popularity of Cularin's exports, and the fact that the system now has representation in the Galactic Senate, certainly provides justification for the military presence. Thaere has invested in Cularin, and the military protects that investment.

So if there seem to be a lot of military vessels in Cularin, that's why. And if there seem to be changes in the way people look at one another when they pass on the street, well, maybe that's related as well. And if trade seems better than ever, with groups from all over the galaxy staking claims, and the people of Cularin prospering like they never have in the past - perhaps it's all related.

Thaere has always been a quiet neighbor. Not necessarily peaceful or friendly - just quiet. The Bothans who populate Odae Ripp's southern plains, vast pastures of green dotted with countless antennae, have always had useful information to share with the people of Cularin about the state of the galaxy. The kind of information that's interesting and sometimes even makes sense. But the ones who know what to listen for can hear the gaps in the stories. More is going on than anyone in Cularin has yet figured out.

And it's happening right over Thaere.

Shades of Meaning

One of the most baffling of "languages" in the Cularin system is the skintone language utilized by the Tarasin. Much of the skintone language actually expresses emotion, rather than complex series of thoughts, although the changing colors of the skin can be used to give basic directions without speech while the Tarasin are hunting or attempting to evade the massive kilassin that roam the jungles of their homeworld.

This more complex form of communication is most often accomplished through a combination of skintone changes in a single raised hand, with more detailed information provided based on which finger or fingers are raised and which fingers shift color. While the colors themselves are meaningful to all Tarasin (and to others familiar with the language), the specific hand-signals and their meanings vary greatly from one hunting party to the next.

What we list below are what Jedi linguists and other experts from throughout the galaxy have deduced about the Tarasin language. While we may have missed nuances, our descriptions represent the basics of the language. We welcome input from any knowledgeable sources to supplement our findings.

Light Green

The base color for Tarasin, while at rest, is a light green. This green is, perhaps not coincidentally, the same shade as the horonna leaves so common in the lower levels of Cularin's jungles. This provides the Tarasin with excellent camouflage while they sleep. A skintone change to light green typically indicates that the Tarasin is at ease with his or her surroundings.

Light Brown

A shade off from the restful horonna green is the light brown that closely matches the color of shadowed tree bark. When a Tarasin hunter needs to actively blend in with the surroundings, he or she often shifts to this color. A change to light brown on the part of a Tarasin indicates that he or she is wary, uncertain of the possibility of danger, or actively attempting to avoid notice.

Other Greens and Browns

These are defaults or general utility colors. They contain many subtle shades that express different restful emotions and attempts at camouflage. The combination of color and facial expression will reveal much about the Tarasin's mood, though so many individual differences exist that it is impossible to catalogue all of them adequately.

White

A change to white on the part of a Tarasin is typically an expression of joy. This is usually accomplished with a shift through several progressively brighter colors, many of which leave traces behind so that the white is rarely pure. The more residual color that is left behind - in other words, the more evidence of a shift to joy - the more excited and happy the Tarasin typically are. Adult Tarasin are usually relatively reserved, and it is uncommon to see adults in highly excited states. However, children often turn white, with many other colors visible, while they are at play.

Black

Just as a change to white indicates heightened positive emotion, a change to black indicates that the Tarasin is attempting to distance him- or herself emotionally from a situation. A wall is being erected, and the Tarasin is functionally done communicating.

Orange

A critical part of the local flora of Cularin is the gargrell flower, a bright orange five-lobed bloom that even the kilassin avoid. The slightest contact with a gargrell results in severe skin irritation and can trigger even more drastic allergic reactions among non-natives. A change to the specific orange color that corresponds to the gargrell indicates that the Tarasin is highly irritated with whomever he or she is speaking and is bordering on angry. Shades of orange indicate increasing levels of irritation or anger, but only the gargrell-orange truly says, "You are ticking me off; get out of my face."

Purple

Because it is highly non-adaptive to be purple in the jungle, the Tarasin do not typically shift to this color when they are out and about. However, while they are in their homes, a color shift to purple tends to indicate amusement, as when they are being entertained in some fashion. In some ways, purple is the silent Tarasin equivalent of laughter. There are rumors of a purple plant - some say flower, some say shrub, and some say weed - that releases laughter-inducing spores. If such a plant exists, the Tarasin have been careful to prevent its exportation.

Yellow

Arrgrar vines are yellow strands that grow, seemingly overnight, from decaying plant material. Their spores are carried by a variety of underbrush-dwelling rodents, and where the arrgrar begin to grow, everything else begins to die. The vines twine around any other living plant and insert tendrils that suck water and nutrients from their hosts. The hosts quickly die, going through a series of shades of yellow (almost a universal color for illness and decay in the jungle), and without a host, the arrgrar die as well - until their spores are picked up by a rodent and carried to another section of the jungle. The yellow of the arrgrar, when adopted by a Tarasin, indicates illness or feelings similar to illness. That aching dread in the pit of your stomach when something is beyond your control, when you feel like you just might throw up? That's arrgrar yellow.

Blue

Shades of blue tend to indicate levels of respect or, at least, deference. Just as the sky above the jungles of Cularin deserves to be venerated for the life-giving rain, so do certain members of Tarasin community - and even, on occasion, outsiders - deserve respect. A genuine show of respect from a Tarasin corresponds to a dark sky-blue skintone, but there are many variations on the tone to indicate the precise degree of respect. At those times when a Tarasin resorts to groveling, the deferential blue is tinged with wary brown.

Pink

Shades of pink, up to and including deep red, indicate agitation. Very rarely are reds or pinks seen alone; more often, they are combined with another common color that indicates the source of the agitation. Blue mixed with pink, for example, would indicate that a Tarasin is very nervous about his own behavior while interacting with someone he knows he should respect.

Other Colors

Colors other than those mentioned here can be adopted by the Tarasin. Certain metallic colors, grays, and shades of the colors mentioned above can be utilized when Tarasin are attempting to camouflage themselves in man-made environments.

In Summation

What we know of the Tarasin language, then, is incomplete only in the sense that there is so much individual variation. But the general patterns, the trends, are there, and utilizing this knowledge, we can understand our jungle friends on Cularin all the better.

-- Jorus Trass, Chief Linguist, Almas Jedi Academy

Yri Worms Wreak Havoc for Miners

The "hot season" on Tilnes, when the moon spins so close to Morasil that the surface of Cularin's moon becomes completely unlivable, was even hotter than usual this year, leading to the collapse of several tunnels in the upper layers of the Verga Mer Mining Company's mine complex. While no personnel were lost in these cave-ins, management on Tilnes has reacted strongly, laying blame squarely at the feet of the yri worms native to the moon. They claim that the worms' tunneling through the upper layers of the crust was responsible for the tunnels' collapse.

Because they certainly couldn't have been dug too close to the surface to begin with...

In a policy memo dated the first day the hot season ended, VMMC head of operations Hiem Bryl condemned the worms and offered a bounty of 50 credits for every dead worm brought in by one of VMMC's miners. What Bryl did not consider, at least initially, was what such a bounty would do to productivity in the mines, as workers began chasing the meter-long blind worms instead of working to extract crystals from the rock. More of a problem was the fact that the worms proved much more intelligent than expected, and began to act almost vengeful when chased.

More tunnels began collapsing, and the rubble revealed that worms had tunneled back and forth beneath the corridor floors until the floors could not hold any more weight. Mine shafts became depositories for excess rock and

worm waste. And miners discovered that these docile creatures actually had teeth -- and they were not afraid to use them when cornered.

This hazardous situation ended with a series of unexpected meteor showers above Tilnes, sending debris crashing to the surface of the moon and chasing the worms deeper into the caverns, away from areas where the miners might hunt them. VMMC canceled the bounty on the worms, having paid out over 50,000 credits and having little to show for it other than a pile of desiccated worm corpses and three dozen collapsed tunnels. Rumors of sanctions against Bryl have floated throughout Tilnes, but to all appearances, he remains as cocky and utterly in charge as ever.

Meanwhile, the worms bide their time beneath Tilnes. While the deeper caverns remain safe and dark, they lack the easy access to delicious crystals that the loose stone higher in the strata offers. The worms wait -- and grow hungrier by the hour.

The Cartel's Gift

From the Office of Thurm Loogg Metatheran Cartel Representative, Cularin

The public relations debacle that led to the death of my predecessor, Velin Wir, and the expulsion of the Metatheran Cartel from the planet of Cularin served as the culmination of a great many unfortunate events. I cannot emphasize enough how very sorry the Cartel is for everything that occurred. It was certainly *never* our intention to cut the most sacred and beautiful ch'hala trees that grow at multiple undisclosed locales deep within your jungles. Nor was it *ever* our intention to violate our trade charters, in even the minor ways my predecessor deemed appropriate.

No, the Cartel does not dislike the people of Cularin. The Cartel loves Cularin! We have invested heavily in the system, and it would be truly silly for us to undercut our own goals by angering those with whom we must work. You must see that it is simply bad business!

And so it was decided that Cularin - woefully ill-protected by her own people, due to years upon years of "assistance" from the military of Thaere - might appreciate a gesture designed to demonstrate the Cartel's firm belief that

Cularin's hardy citizens are more than capable of taking care of themselves. A ship, designation XP-38 and custom outfitted for the protection of Cularin, was given into the hands of the planetary governors almost a year ago. Yet somehow, even this gesture of goodwill has turned into a public relations problem of sorts, due to a series of unfortunate misunderstandings.

We have been informed that in the course of conducting tours of the XP-38, several of the groups claimed to find a transmitter that had been planted aboard the ship. Why, nothing could be further from the truth! I can say with the greatest certainty that no transmitter was set up within the XP-38 by the Metatheran Cartel.

It makes my hearts heavy to know that such erroneous thoughts could even enter the minds of those whom we have so struggled to help. Yet given the actions of my predecessor, I cannot blame any of the citizens of Cularin for a lack of faith in the Cartel, and it is certainly my plan to demonstrate that we are trustworthy through the future conduct of our business, our continued investment in Cularin, and further gifts to her peoples. The Cartel is your friend, people of Cularin! These public relations nightmares are truly just an unfortunate series of misunderstandings!

It has further been reported that while only a single transmitter was found on the XP-38 (and should such a transmitter have been found there, I would strongly recommend discussing the matter with the crew, who were hired on Tolea Biqua and quite possibly would have had their own agendas), the transport case for the transmitter was found, and it contained three additional, empty slots - all presumably for other transmitters.

There have been rumblings of discontent for some time now, as individuals whisper about the locations of the other transmitters, and "What the Cartel is up to." What we are up to, as ever, is business. We are not stealth-merchants. We leave such things to Bothans, and others who excel at them. No, we are here to help the economy of Cularin grow and prosper, and to bring prestige to Caarimon and Filordis by our expanding presence in the galaxy. We will be a great power! And those who assist us will become great as well.

The XP-38 is a fine vessel, given to Cularin for her protection in good faith. It gladdens me to see her in orbit around your beautiful planet. At the same time, it saddens me when her turrets swing toward our own orbiting station in a menacing way. We are not a threat to you, people of Cularin. The Cartel

brings hope and new life, and it is my sincere wish that the misguided actions of Velin Wir do not forever stay with the people of Cularin as a most salient feature of the Cartel's business practices.

Troop Movements

The standard mode of operation for the Thaereian military has focused on their stated mission: "To protect the citizens of Cularin from domestic disturbances localized in the asteroid belt." In recent weeks, though, the military has begun running extensive exercises beyond the orbit of Morjakar, just inside the comet cloud. Incoming transports have reported definite "flight wings" of fighters going through maneuvers, and unconfirmed reports put a red-on-black fighter as the lead in the tightest, most precise wings present.

From a distance, no identifying markings were visible. However, it is well known in most any spaceport in the Mid-Rim that red-on-black is the base scheme for the heavily-modified Z-95 Headhunter *Dicer*, piloted by Eelo Begraas. Begraas, of course, is the ranking pilot, chief flight instructor, and overall tactical advisor to the Thaereian military.

From the time of his birth on Bothawui, Begraas wanted something more than the Bothan lifestyle offered. While he was gifted at the arts for which his species is known, he also possessed a flair for the dramatic -- and an addiction to adrenaline. He began Podracing at an early age, and as soon as he reached adulthood, joined one system's military after the next, searching for a place he would fit in. Ultimately, he wound up with the Thaereian military, and has been there for the last seven years. His actual presence with the Thaereian command, even for maneuvers, is surprising, as the Thaereians have found that it can be quite profitable to "rent" Begraas's services to those with the financial means to afford them. He doesn't come cheap, but he is capable of such remarkable stealth and precision in his ship that many systems - and more than a few Hutts - have found his services more than worth the price.

His quick temper and short attention span are such that the Thaereian military recognizes the necessity of keeping him "entertained" by loaning him out. If they can fund further trade and better protect the Cularin system in the process, all the better.

His ship, the *Dicer*, is a custom Z-95 Headhunter Begraas began working on soon after joining the military. The ship itself is black, designed to blend in with the starfield when he attacks, and highlighted in blood red. His personal insignia, a clenched fist, is found on either side of the cockpit. The ship is incredibly maneuverable and is said to possess prototype technology Begraas earned on one of his "jobs" out in Hutt space.

Few things are more terrifying than Begraas in his ship. It is said that frequently, the mere sight of his vessel sends opposing pilots into hysterics as they hurry to jump to hyperspace. It is also said that they only make that jump if Begraas allows it.

Outside of his ship, Begraas is at best unimposing and at worst near comical. He is one of the scrawniest Bothans in the galaxy, all bones and sinew with hardly a muscle on him. He has a constant snuffle, which has led to an absent habit of wiping his nose as he sits in whatever cantina is handy that day, and he dresses in faded fatigues rather than any kind of meaningful uniform.

Unless you plan never to leave the ground again, though, it's bad to pick a fight with Begraas. He frequently travels with a very well-armed astromech (designation R6-S1), which he refers to as "Shootfirst." He uses the droid to cover his escape when necessary, and once he's to his ship, he rarely has any trouble retrieving his property. After the second time he did a strafing run over an unfriendly city, people began to catch on.

Why he and the *Dicer* are leading wings of troops on the outskirts of Cularin is a mystery. One thing is certain, though - it can't be good news that Begraas is here.

Senator Wren's Social Calendar

This is "Eye on Cularin's" society diva, Yara Grugara, reporting from a nice comfy bench outside Senator Wren's offices on Cularin. The Senator's not here right now - just her crack staff, keeping an eye on things - but just look at what we've got. Two stories of glass and duracrete with sculptures by some of the most renowned artists in the system - a façade that is entirely likely to be featured in an upcoming issue of *Galactic Architecture*, if I have any say about it! It seems like only yesterday that the Senator first traveled to Coruscant to represent the system, and my, how things have changed! In the space of two

years, this little girl who grew up in the shadows of the bizarre political world of Cularin has emerged and taken great strides in the even more bizarre political world at coordinates zero, zero, zero. And let me be the first to tell you, Lavina Wren is not a little girl any more!

Word has it that she's been a busy little bantha while on Coruscant, pressing the flesh with luminaries and dignitaries from around the galaxy, culminating in a dinner invitation from the Supreme Chancellor himself - which she turned down! At least, my sources tell me that she had "other plans" on the evening of the Supreme Chancellor's invitation, and his office hasn't had anything much to say about it. But you know what I say - you're nobody special until you've turned down somebody special!

So our little Lavina is making quite a name for herself. We've now got connections in every corner of the galaxy, there may be trade routes opening up to us, new trading partners coming in (and maybe some of them will chase off the icky pig-faces - ew!), and all sorts of great things are on the horizon. But that, friends, is not the most interesting part of all this. Oh no, not by a long shot!

You see, friends, I hear that one of the reasons the Senator turned down the Chancellor's invitation was that she already had a *date* that night. That's right, there's a mystery man in our sweet Senator's life, a dark horse who's come in and swept her off her feet. I've done some checking, and you know what it sounds like to me?

One standard month. 23 nights unaccounted for. Hello? Anyone there? Our little Lavina has been doing a spectacular job keeping herself out of the public eye, for someone who's a representative to the Senate! But she's there, in chambers, every day. I've had my interns check the records, and she hasn't missed a vote yet, has been lobbying for increased sanctions against Piggy and the Orbiting Nasties, and has been making us all very proud. So where has she been at night?

Just between us, there's a little bistro way up north on Coruscant where I happen to know some people. And they tell me that someone who looks very much like Senator Wren has been in there on a regular basis with a tall gentleman. The happy couple spends a great deal of time in a dimly lit corner booth, chatting and laughing away, and they've gotten to the point where they

don't even need to order any more. The wait staff all know them by sight, and the food is prepared without having to disturb the love birds.

And what do they always have as an appetizer? Why, sauteed vros. You know, those little fish that swim so close to the shoreline in Cularin's southern seas, but that aren't found anywhere else in the galaxy? The same appetizer Senator Wren served at the parties celebrating her election, because she's loved them for years?

I'm so proud of her! Now, I just need to find out who this mystery man is, and as soon as I do, you'll be the first to know. Unfortunately, the Senator isn't talking about her personal life any more than she talked about those rumors during her campaign that she might be descended from Reidi Artom - but who knows?

I've got some other friends who say that she's probably doing the smart thing, not talking about her new beau in public. After all, anyone who wants to get at her would *love* to have another target to take a shot at, so she's probably protecting him. But really - who would want to do anything to harm Lavina? She's a wonderful, lovely woman, who's doing a world of good for Cularin. So I say, "Show us your man, Senator Wren! And we'll love him as much as we love you!"

Into the Academy

Nestled in the center of Forard, the Jedi Academy on Almas has been home to both young and old Jedi for decades. Every day Masters, Knights, and Padawans all make their way in and out of the great double-doors, 5-meter-tall swirls of metal and crystal that stand open from dawn until dusk - or what passes for dawn and dusk on Almas. Dawn arrives as the kaluthin spread their leaves, allowing heat and light to issue forth, and dusk comes when they fold in upon themselves once again.

Very few, other than Jedi, have ever been allowed within the Academy. Deliveries are taken at one of a dozen loading docks and transported into the Academy by Padawans. All cleaning, maintenance, and cooking is done by Jedi. Only the rare individual not of the Order - such as "Mother" Missira - is allowed within.

Those who see the interior of the Academy never fail to experience at least a touch of awe, though, because behind the doors of metal and crystal, behind the outer walls of white marble veined with streaks of silver so bright that the building could never have been safely constructed much nearer a star, is a place of beauty and wonder.

The entry hall of the Academy is of the same white marble as the outer walls, but the veins of silver are thicker, twisting into knots that meet at the intersection of wall and floor. Small inset cases line the walls, most somewhere around waist-height for humans. These cases contain plaques listing the names of Almas Jedi who have successfully completed their trials within the Academy's chambers, along with names of Almas Jedi who have perished in defense of the Jedi way. They also contain mementos - Master Lanius insists that they are neither trophies nor souvenirs, but reminders - of conflicts the Jedi have faced and overcome. In the final case, at the far right end of the entry hall, is a bust of an austere Twi'lek with lines around his eyes and a scarf around his neck. While no nameplate adorns the bust, every student and Master knows the wise face of the Academy's founder, Nerra Ziveri.

The entry hall leads into one of the most used (yet quietest) portions of the Academy, the fountain chamber. Padded marble benches line the walls, with extra cushions stored beneath for those who come late or choose the floor. In the center of the chamber is an immense fountain, the waters of which bubble around the sculpture of a hand, palm out, extended as in welcome. The bubbling of the fountain is used in the training of the youngest of Jedi students, to assist them in focusing and learning to concentrate and center themselves. While the fountain ceases to be a central part of the educational process as soon as the child is accepted as a Padawan, many students retain fond memories of the fountain and still find it useful as a tool in their meditations. Instructors such as Masters Lanius and Kirlocca are often found among those silently reflecting beside the fountain as well. While they certainly do not need such a focus, either will happily explain that while meditation is by necessity a solitary activity, it's important that the students understand that even when they're in their most solitary moments, they're not alone. They're always part of the Jedi Order. Even when they must do something where no one else can provide assistance, they always have the influence of those who have gone before, those who have taught them and helped them to become who and what they are.

All around this lowest level of the Academy are classrooms of various shapes and sizes. In opposite corners are two of the largest classrooms, enormous tiered rooms capable of seating over 100 students each. The northernmost room is equipped with workstations connected to the Academy network, while the southernmost room is free of all but the most basic technology. Both are home to classes on the Jedi arts, the history of the Order, and the galaxy it serves.

One of the rooms that most fascinates many Padawans in their early days is the lightsaber training chamber. Here, Kirlocca engages the students with practice blades and observes and trains them as they engage one another. The center of the practice chamber (which has no door -- only a curtain through which other instructors can enter and leave without disturbing the session) is taken up by an enormous blue mat covered with a bright red symbol of the Republic. Kirlocca keeps a close eye on the students as they practice with one another and as they move through the forms that they must master if they are to wield their lightsabers with grace and honor.

In the center of the northern wall of the Academy is the grand lecture hall. Here, visiting dignitaries speak to the Academy, and Master Lanius and other instructors deliver annual addresses. The annual recitation of the story of Kibh Jeen occurs in the grand lecture hall, which is tiered both up and down, allowing room to accommodate all of the Academy's students and instructors, with the speaker suspended on a floating platform and holo-projected to an angle viewable by every attendee.

With the offices, the classrooms, the grand lecture hall, and the fountain room, the entry level of the Jedi Academy on Almas still remains only one of the fascinating aspects of this magnificent construction.

Now I Am the Master

From the Padawan's Resource Guide, Almas Jedi Academy:

Whatever stories you may have heard about how trials work at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, you should put them out of your mind before the time comes for you to undertake your trials on Almas. Because the Almas Academy operates under a slightly different educational model than that utilized on Coruscant, our trials are distinct in some respects (and less so in others) from

theirs. This says nothing of relative difficulty; some Padawans might find the Coruscant trials easier, while others would give anything to undergo the trials on Almas. Just as there is more than one path to learning to wield the Force responsibly, so are there multiple ways to demonstrate readiness to wear the mantle of a Jedi Knight.

The trials on Almas are tri-fold. Working with Jedi Masters here, on Coruscant, and throughout the galaxy, Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk developed a series of exercises that test the prospective Jedi Knight both mentally and physically. Failing to pass any one of the trials is grounds for remediation; failing to pass any two trials in a single attempt to become a Jedi Knight is grounds for dismissal from the Academy.

Trial 1: The Jedi Philosophy

Classrooms, textbooks, and holovids provide the foundations for understanding the philosophy of the Jedi. However, it is not enough to simply understand the philosophy. The Jedi Knight must embody the philosophy of the Order, must make it a part of who she is, and must understand it as she does herself.

When a Padawan is ready to test for the level of Jedi Knight, with the consent of her mentor, she arranges an audience with a mini-council. This mini-council consists of her mentor, Master Lanius, and three other Masters at the Academy (or visiting Masters from Coruscant, on rare occasions). Most frequently, all of those involved in the mini-council are familiar with the Padawan's work, having observed her in courses, field activities, or daily life.

Because every student at the Academy is different, this first trial is unique to each Padawan. There are many aspects of the Jedi Code, and the more general philosophy of the Order, which may be relevant to the Padawan's progress. If there are elements of the Code with which she has struggled, or issues that have been persistent problems in her training, she will be asked about these. If she has adopted a novel approach to her training, then she will be questioned about it.

For example, it has been some time since Kirlocca trained a student in the wielding of multiple lightsabers. The last was a young woman, hereafter A.J. Her interest, and her training with Kirlocca, focused on the art, on the centering she found while practicing with two lightsabers. On the whole, however, dual wielding of lightsabers is discouraged; it is not the focus of the

Jedi, after all, to seek out conflict. It is our goal to avoid conflict whenever possible, and igniting not one, but two, lightsabers can make it difficult to convince those who would attack you that you do not want to be attacked. It can be construed as antagonistic, or an attempt to inspire fear.

Much of A.J.'s questioning by the mini-council focused on her training with the two lightsabers. Why was it important to her? What did it provide her? Why had she utilized so much time and energy in her training to develop this skill? The questions were challenging, but fair, and A.J. satisfied the committee that her desire to learn this rare fighting style was motivated by the desire to develop herself and to protect others, and that she would only resort to the use of more than one lightsaber if the situation grew truly dire.

The questions reflected more than the mini-council's worries that A.J. might fall victim to the dark side if she continued wielding two lightsabers. What is held in the hands has much less impact on the worthiness of a Jedi than what is held in her heart, and that is what A.J.'s understanding of the Jedi philosophy demonstrated.

Trial 2: The Jedi Peace

Whether storms rage outside his hut on a strange, desolate world, or the small freighter rocks as blaster fire assails its hull; whether his friends are wounded, bleeding helplessly on the floor, or he himself is moments from death; there is always the calm of the Jedi, always the inner peace that allows him to hear the will of the Force.

Upon successful completion of the first trial, the Jedi is dismissed by the mini-council and sent to the chambers in the basement of the Academy. These rooms, three meters square, were designed to allow for complete silence and stillness as the student contemplates what lies ahead. A standard set of instructions is given to each Padawan as he leaves the first trial.

"Meditate on why it is you want to be a Jedi Knight. Search your heart for the truth of why you have undertaken this path. Seek to understand the commitment you will make, if you become a Jedi Knight. You will meditate for five days."

There are no questions asked when the Padawan emerges from his meditation. He either completes the meditation, or he does not. Such is the nature of success or failure in the second trial.

Trial 3: The Jedi Promise

All Jedi undertake their training understanding that the dark side is only a breath away. Many have fallen victim to its lure. The Jedi Knight cannot allow herself to fall. She must make a promise to herself, and to the Order, to protect peace and justice throughout the galaxy. This promise must be made knowing that there are many things in the galaxy outside the control of the Jedi, and that each of these must be faced without fear, allowing the Force to be her guide. The Jedi Promise is made not in words, but in deeds, and is a promise not to give in to fear no matter what the cost.

If the first trial is wholly tailored to the individual, and the second is the same for all who experience it, the third provides a happy medium. All individuals fear something. To become a Jedi, one must overcome that fear, to learn not to be ruled by the fear. The feared object, creature, or person will vary from one Padawan to the next, but most fears can be accommodated, and presented, in the context of the third trial.

The most common form of the final trial is a journey into the deserts on the southern half of Almas. This journey may be undertaken alone, though it is more common for at least the Padawan's mentor to accompany her. Once in the desert, a confrontation takes place between a very real threat that embodies the Padawan's greatest fear (as determined by her mentor and the mini-council) and that must be overcome. The means by which the obstacle is overcome - intellect, combat, or something else entirely - is at the discretion of the Padawan, and is taken into consideration when determining whether the rank of Jedi Knight will be bestowed upon her. Defeating that which has been feared is not necessarily a sign of success, if fear or anger were tools in the Padawan's victory.

The trials, then, will be different for every Padawan who undertakes them. Over time, and through extensive interactions with your mentor, the strengths and weaknesses of your training will become apparent, and even as you are learning your lessons, the trials will be taking shape in the minds of your instructors, your Master, and your friends. May the Force be with you, as you enter into your trials and strive to become a Jedi Knight.

A Dark Cult

In a system like Cularin, with a history of Sith activity dating back thousands of years, where an Academy was founded by those who would keep watch over the ruins of one of the great fortresses of the Sith, it must be inevitable that this day would come. Citizen and criminal alike step warily, watching over their shoulders for signs of the dark force that has made its way into Cularin. There have always been devotees of the dark side, lurking on the fringes of society all around the galaxy. Now, in Cularin, there are rumors that the dark cult may soon make its presence felt in very real, very painful ways.

The following message was posted, for a matter of five minutes, to every news board in Cularin. While it was deleted almost immediately, downloaded copies survived. The headers were consistent with those used for the transmission of information to and from the Jedi Academy and seem to indicate that the message was intercepted, decrypted, and made public. The Academy has issued the following statement regarding the posting: "The information that was publicized two days ago does not necessarily reflect factual details of goings-on in the Cularin system. A great deal of information - both good and bad - is available in the public record, and any transmission that purports to offer insights into secret groups of Force users should be viewed with a critical eye." No further statement has been forthcoming.

[[HEADER INFORMATION REMOVED FOR SECURITY REASONS]]

Central -

Early indications of significant dark side activity may have been overstated. Patrols report no meaningful deviations from previous activity by cultists.

Organization remains weak. No central core is yet visible, and the structure seems a loose matrix without a problematic command base. Cularin proper houses one element, meeting location indeterminate. Evidence indicates that cultists are separate from the Wyrld, but that the two groups may be working together.

Elements are also present on Tolea Biqua, Varna Biqua, Eslo Magua, Hyllos, Depatar, and potentially a half-dozen other cities of Genarius. It is unlikely that any elements are present in the asteroid belt. A different darkness exists there, but neither we nor Nirama's people have been able to localize it. Observations

of Nirama indicate that he is aware of the problem, but remains uninvolved in it. Postulate that he is busy with Trammel.

Only evidence of meaningful change in cult activity is directed at Almas. Strongly advise increased security on-planet. We have been unable to learn the precise nature of the threat to the Academy, but believe the cultists may be preparing to make a move on the other pole. It is not unreasonable to suspect they may have learned something that has emboldened them enough to finally come out of the shadows and make themselves known.

Cularin is not ready for the kind of power they are likely to wield. The threats the system has endured so far have been political, economic, and criminal. If we have been unable to locate them before now, they must have substantial resources at their disposal, and more facility with the dark side than we had allowed ourselves to believe. It is only in the last week that we have even found solid evidence of their existence; before then, we were chasing fog. With evidence, though, we must still decide what to do.

We leave the decision to Central, and will continue to gather information regarding cult activities. That we have found as much as we have, as quickly as we have, means one of two things:

Either the cultists are growing careless and not bothering to cover their tracks, or they want to be found.

Neither offers comfort.

IP17

[[ELEMENTS OF ENCRYPTION SEQUENCE FOLLOW]]

Current speculation is that the transmission was from a Jedi envoy and was meant for the eyes of someone at the Academy. Other theories have been floated as well, with one of the most troubling being that the information was put out by the dark cult itself, a way to place the seeds of fear in the people of Cularin. So far, it seems, it may be working . . .

The Sith Fortress

A Report From Minos Fel'Kona Jedi Knight, Almas Academy

For as long as there have been Jedi on Almas, we have avoided the wasteland. It is an unclean place, strong in the dark side of the Force, and dangerous. The air is toxic enough to kill a bantha - on good days. Or at least, that was the way our sensors had always read.

Within the last six months, sensor readings have been erratic. Recently, patrols began to investigate the wasteland once more, some under the command of senior officials at the Academy. It was learned that, quite to the contrary of what was previously believed to be the case, the air is almost breathable. Breath masks remain a necessity, but there is none of the skin toxicity that has been remarked upon by expeditions in decades past.

Recent surveys have provided heretofore unknown data. Regarding the dome that covers the protruding tip of Rivan's fortress, it has been dated at 1,132 years, indicating that Rivan must have been quite advanced in years prior to the Battle of Ruusan. This suggests that he did not arise from human stock, as has been speculated in the past, but instead descended from one of the longer-lived species of the galaxy. This makes the assumption that the credit given to Rivan for the construction of the fortress is actually due to the Sith. It remains possible that someone other than Rivan (perhaps his master) was actually responsible for the construction of the edifice, and that Rivan took it as his own when he slew the original creator.

There is no indication that any surface-dwelling creatures live within a thousand kilometers of the fortress, but there are signs of sub-surface life. It has long been remarked that great worms live beneath the sands of Almas, though none have yet been captured for study. Indications are that such worms do not, in fact, exist, although leavings similar to those of krayt dragons have been discovered (in fossil form) scattered across the wasteland. Given the difficulty inherent in distinguishing large, subterranean reptiles from enormous worms when scanning from outside a planet's atmosphere into an area marked by substantial dark-side emanations, the mistake seems reasonable. We still have no visual confirmation of exceedingly large life forms, but something is certainly living beneath the sands of the wasteland.

A handful of expeditions have attempted to circumvent the dome. One such attempt involved the use of small-scale mining equipment to burrow beneath the outermost layer of the structure. After 10 meters, the mining equipment broke through rock and crashed into a cavern below. This cavern provided access to what appears to be an entry hall. The corridors of the hall are polished black marble, and the hall itself slopes down at a 10-degree angle, proceeding deeper into the planet.

The marble is carved in numerous places, and our linguists have yet to decipher all of the script. Some of it is apparently written in the ancient Sith tongue, while other elements of the text continue to elude our comprehension. One element of the carvings that has been deciphered is a series of symbols that line the walls of the hall as it slopes downward.

It appears that Rivan left behind a record of his pedigree. His name is the last in the series of symbols, at the bottom of the hall, where it opens out into a large cavern. Many of the other names - and we assume they are names, since approximately every third set of symbols corresponds to the name of a known Sith lord - have associated dates, though they do not match dates as they are presented on the standard galactic calendar. It is believed that they represent dates of ascension and death for various Sith lords. The first name, at the top of the hall, is that of Naga Sadow, and it is widely believed that this is Darth Rivan's Sith lineage, which he traced back several thousand years.

Deeper explorations of the fortress have as yet been unsuccessful. The influence of the dark side in this place is great, and there is a constant tugging at the mind of any Force-sensitive individual, a temptation, a promise of power and glory. As such, no Jedi is allowed to remain in the fortress for more than 90 minutes, and the guards outside the fortress are rotated every four hours. All are provided with substance 90A in order to *[this portion of document deleted for security purposes]*

The strength of the Force effects in place at the fortress indicates that there may be one or more active devices (or artifacts) in the bowels of the structure. Until such time as we feel that deeper explorations provide no undue threat to the safety of the Jedi involved, however, we cannot recommend such explorations. There is much to be studied closer to the surface, and with patience, we will learn what must be learned.

A Friendly Face

This is Yara Grugara, reporting from - would you believe it? - a hidden base deep within the asteroid belt! Of all the places this reporter thought she might ever end up when she started working for "Eye on Cularin," this has got to be close to the bottom of the list. I mean, if you skip the possibility of being kidnapped by the Blood Velkurs or the Brotherhood or one of those awful pirate gangs and kept as a toy for one of their leaders, or maybe fed to some horrible creature for their amusement, it was just never a place this reporter expected to go. It's dark, and dingy, and - I've got to be honest here - simply not one of the most fashionable places to be. And if there is one thing this reporter strives for, it's fashion, fashion, fashion!

Every once in a while, though, there's an opportunity that no journalist worth her spice is going to pass up. What, Yara? Are you insane? What kind of opportunity would be so good that it would take you to a place populated by outlaws, ruffians, and several thousand smelly humanoids wearing last year's fashions? Well, someone said the magic word, my friends, the word that will take yours truly, Yara Grugara, anywhere in the galaxy.

Makeover.

That's right, friends and loved ones. I got a call, just yesterday morning, that the makeover to end all makeovers was about to take place in the belt, and would I like to cover it?

Would I like to cover it? As if you needed to ask! Yara Grugara is all over that like nerf-hide on a Jedi's seat cushion!

Hopping a transport with a rather grumpy Twi'lek and my camera crew, I was whisked off to parts unknown. Why unknown? Because if I told you, they'd probably kill me!

Oh, that's a joke -- don't worry about Yara. They just said that if I wanted the interview, I couldn't tell anyone where we went, so here I am, not telling you where we are, and here we are, getting ready for the makeover to end all makeovers. But it's not your standard makeover. I came in expecting all sorts of hair stylists and make-up consultants and racks and racks of the latest gear from Coruscant. There's lots of gear here, and some of it may even be from Coruscant, but I've got to tell you - it's much more along the lines of

"hardware," if you know what I mean, and I think you might. And who is the object of the makeover? Why, that would be none other than Nirama himself.

Now, friends and loved ones, I'll be the first to admit that if ever there was a - well, whatever he is - in need of a makeover, it would have to be Nirama. I mean, how many times do you meet a four-eyed, three-armed, wrinkled-like-a-pui-hound-after-a-long-soak individual who is in charge of a major crime syndicate? But as I learned in my pre-interview briefing, there were going to be no cosmetic changes to Nirama's appearance. So what, I asked, is the deal with calling it a makeover? Why do you need Yara Grugara, of all people, in this dark, dank, dismal little cave?

The answer came when Nirama himself sat down across from me. Friends and loved ones, I don't know what's been going on in this individual's life, but he had some things to say that I found rather interesting, and I think you will, too.

YG: Um . . . well, hello! I must say, you are certainly . . . striking, in person.

N: Attempted sarcasm masquerading as a veiled allusion to my appearance and attempting to be clever will get you nowhere.

YG: Riiight. So, what brings you here today? Or, rather - what brings *me* here today?

N: You are here because there are many misconceptions about Nirama. These must be remedied.

YG: Of course. Lots of misconceptions. Why do you think Yara Grugara, popular host of "Eye on Cularin" and idol of millions who would surely miss her if anything were to happen to her, can do anything about that?

N: You are the queen of makeovers, are you not?

YG: Well, I've got to hand it to you, Nir - can I call you Nir?

N: Nirama. Please.

YG: Sure, Nir. I've got to hand it to you -- when you're right, you're right. I am the queen of makeovers.

N: Please, call me Nirama.

YG: Of course. So tell me, Nir - AMA! You thought I'd forget, didn't you? Tell me, what are those misconceptions that have you crinkling your forehead, and how can Yara help clear them up?

N: There are those who do not believe that Nirama has the best interests of Cularin at heart. They do not think Nirama values the people of Cularin. This is not true. Without the people of Cularin, there is no business here. With no business, there are no profits. With no profits, there is no reason to remain. The people of Cularin are good for Nirama.

YG: Did you know that when you talk really passionately about something, your top eyes blink faster than your bottom eyes?

N: What?

YG: Oh, it's your eyes. I mean, they're fascinating, but I would have thought they'd blink at the same time.

N: It is the lights. Leave me alone about my eyes. I want to talk about the people of Cularin, and how important they are to me.

YG: Of course. We all need our public, don't we?

N: Yes. A businessman must have those to whom he provides service. All aspects of the financial stability of the system must be considered in making decisions as to the ultimate good or ill of Cularin. We have long been part of the financial structure of the Cularin system. We do not lie or cheat. Not like the Metatheran Cartel.

YG: Well, oink-oink to them! I tell you what, my friends and viewers just can't stand those Caarites and those funny-looking Filordi. Not that all funny-looking aliens are bad, mind you. And not to imply that you're funny-looking, of course.

N: What are you babbling about?

YG: Just making things clear for the viewers at home.

N: Making things clear? You keep talking while I am trying to explain the delicate balance of power in the Cularin system, and how my smugglers help to

maintain that balance by keeping all elements of the environment equivalent to the best of our ability!

YG: Riiight . . . and that whole Trade Federation thing on Naboo was really the doings of some Sith Lord, and not just those dumb Neimoidians being greedy.

N: What are you talking about -- Naboo? Sith? We are talking about Cularin!

YG: Temper, temper, Nir. Just because you're a crime lord, doesn't mean you can get all uppity with Yara Grugara.

N: My name is Nirama, you bleach-headed idiot! Nirama! I am one of the single most powerful non-Jedi in this system, I am trying to talk to you about what I do, and you blather about my eyes -

YG: They're doing it again, you know. That's so strange, one set blinking faster than the other.

N: Gaah! You are no journalist! You are a vapid, inane, womprat-breeding joke!

YG: What does "vapid" mean?

N: This interview is over.

Yara was returned to Cularin, confused but unharmed. The interview with Nirama aired three times a day for the next week, and has provided endless fodder for commentators and comedians throughout Cularin - at Yara's expense, of course. No one with half a brain jokes about Nirama.

Profile of an Assassin

At first glance, there is nothing to set Melo Centris apart from any other individual who might wander through the cantinas of Cularin. That does depend, to some extent, on who - or what - she chooses to look like, though.

On rare occasions, she ventures out into public wearing her "true face," that of a Human female in her mid-twenties. She has shoulder-length light brown hair and gray-green eyes, and she stands a little over 1.7 meters in height - or at least, that's the official version of what she looks like. All of those features are subject to change on a whim, though, as Centris is almost without peer in the

art of disguise. This skill serves her well as one of the rising young assassins of the galaxy.

As with any assassin, it is sometimes unclear whether Centris deserves credit for all the murders attributed to her, or whether she perhaps has committed many more than are currently known. Much of her work has been contracted through Hutt space, and her targets have ranged from a Cerean ambassador (the late Lus-Nati Fellaus, who was killed in his residence; security recordings show only another Cerean - whose retinal scans matched those of Fellaus's sister - entering and leaving his residence during the time the murder occurred, but the sister was on the far side of the galaxy at the time) to an Alderaanian holoivid star (the fondly remembered androgyne Levi Schoen, who was killed on-set with a knife to the back as the holorecorders filmed the coronation of her popular "Queen Jesrella" character). The kills that have been confirmed to be the work of Centris number in the dozens, and they have taken place in all the corners of the galaxy.

The common understanding of Centris is that she was born and grew up in the undercity of Coruscant, having to fend for herself. It is widely believed that she is Force-sensitive, but that she harbors a great dislike for Jedi because of some event (or combination of events) during her childhood. She has yet to target an active member of the Jedi Order, but if the talk is any indication, she is eyeing one or more ranking Jedi, some of whom reside in Cularin. How she made the connection to Nal Hutta is unclear, but the ties are evident in her work. She leaves messages with her victims' bodies, and frequently, they are individuals (like Lus-Nati Fellaus) who have angered one or more Hutts through their actions.

Her methods are brutal and very personal. She prefers knives and is particularly fond of poisons. It is not uncommon for her to utilize a paralytic poison to ensure that the victim is unable to resist, and then make a quick, certain kill. Depending on the particulars of her assignment, she will choose poisons that provide greater or lesser amounts of pain to her victims, and she is a mistress of each poison she uses. In other words, she has worked with them for so long and come into contact with them so many times that she is virtually immune to all of them. Some claim that she is actually a near-Human whose body chemistry is such that it need only encounter a poison once before it develops a form of antibody against it. Regardless, with the amount of poisoning Centris has done, it would be naïve to believe that she has never accidentally poisoned herself - and yet, she lives.

On a number of occasions, her death has been reported, including here in Cularin. However, she is always seen again, and there are rumors that she has paid for surgeries to introduce a number of look-alikes into the galaxy to further spread the fear she hopes to inspire. As with many who tread darker paths, she treats fear as an ally, and while she kills without passion, she feeds on the anger and hatred of the Hutts in her work. She tends to work with non-Humans, particularly Devaronians, Bothans, and Zabraks, as her allies.

While it appears that she may have originally come to Cularin on behalf of the Hutts, it is unclear whether she remains in the system for their reasons or for her own. She can be anywhere, and anyone, at any time. She could be the individual at the next booth over in the restaurant, or the man on the stool beside you in the cantina. She could be an aide to Governor Chistor, or a smuggler in Nirama's employ. She could be a Padawan at the Academy on Almas or, with enough planning, a droid from Uffel.

She is a dangerous, angry individual. Her ultimate agenda remains unclear. But it can't be good.

A Changing Galaxy

It began, if reports are to be believed, with a smiling face in the sky. While the Metatheran Cartel had made its presence known in the system for some time - having contributed to unrest, but always managing to keep their upturned noses clean - the disruption of the Reidi Artom celebration found the people of Cularin in a state of disquiet like never before.

The image of Velin Wir stayed with the people of Cularin -- the way he smiled down at them, the way he wheedled and cajoled and laughed in that strange squeak of a voice. He was never a pleasant individual, but the depths of his treachery remained, at that time, unknown. Within a matter of weeks, things grew clear. Wir had commanded that Cartel harvesters cut one of the sacred ch'hala groves of the Tarasin, and a movement surfaced within the Cularin underworld to remove the Cartel from the system.

Following a period of intense political maneuvering, Wir's machinations were revealed, and Wir himself died at the hands of the citizens of Cularin. This was, in many ways, a remarkable turn of events - not in the sense of Wir's death, but in the manner that it came about. Cularin has never been a hotbed of political activism, nor has it been a great center of commerce. Yet despite all of

the inertia the galaxy has to offer, the citizens of Cularin stepped out of their daily roles and began to take a very welcome proactive approach to the well-being of their home. They became, on the day the Cartel left the planet and went into orbit, heroes.

To have watched such a transformation with an historian's eye is rare indeed. There are moments when cultures shift, when people realize that there is more to their lives than they had ever imagined. Those of us who read of times and places far removed from our own are familiar with the idea of such shifts, but to observe one in progress, to see a people transformed - it has been simultaneously numbing and exhilarating.

I digress. Following their remarkable discovery of the plot involving Wir and his subsequent death, it would have been easy for the newborn heroes of Cularin to sink back into the safety and obscurity of the surrounding populace. They did not. Instead, their reputations led them to be called into service to assist Nirama in dealing with a group that we now know as "The Cell." The Cell appears to have been a splinter faction within Nirama's organization that, dissatisfied with his leadership, elected to replace him rather forcibly. Through the intervention of Cularin's heroes, the coup was averted, and Nirama remained in control of smuggling in the system. While the Jedi Academy can offer no official opinion in the matter, history does show that benevolent leaders who provide stability are almost universally preferred over unknown leaders who might kill to obtain power. Therefore, speaking as a historian (if not a Jedi), I believe that the choice of Nirama (the known power) over the Cell (an unknown quantity if there ever was one) showed wisdom.

The conflicts that followed seemed to build upon one another, almost as if they had been designed to do so. The presence of a fallen Jedi was discovered just in time to prevent him from wreaking havoc on the system, although the Jedi himself was neither captured nor killed. Of late, the Academy has been engaged in transporting the remnants of his attempt at power to the Jedi Council on Coruscant, so that better defenses may be put in place.

One of the most disturbing developments of the previous year was the discovery of a hidden base within the Cularin system constructed by the Thaereian military. Master Lanius had felt a disturbance in the Force, but it was too vague and distant for him to make out clearly until it was already nearly too late. By the time he arrived at the scene, Cularin's heroes had already discovered the base and were in the process of making their exit. The

Thaereian military has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, but their peace-keeping forces have been under much more intense scrutiny.

A year after their dismissal from Cularin, the Metatheran Cartel again attempted to regain entry to the planet, this time through political maneuverings within the highest levels of Cularin's government. With the assistance of "unfortunate circumstances" surrounding Hedrett's Councilor Westa Impeveri in particular, it appeared that they might succeed. It was not to be, however, and they remain in orbit above Cularin, conducting business as usual.

Most recently, there have been signs of a growing darkness throughout the system. Much of the darkness, it appears, is localized in the Sith fortress on the far side of Almas. This comes as little surprise to anyone, although the timing - which coincides with a darkness that is making itself felt in the Asteroid Belt - may yet be cause for concern.

In watching the heroes of Cularin, I have learned a great deal. One day, I hope that my records will serve as a means for other historians to understand the age in which they live, as the writings of those who have gone before have assisted me. What is perhaps most exciting of all is the definite feeling I have that the best of our heroes is yet to be seen.

Oden Malksch

Historian, Almas Jedi Academy

The Cell Revisited

To the Membership -

Loyalty. This is the concept that has ever been most key to our survival and our prosperity. I ask loyalty of you, and I provide loyalty in return. It is never a certain proposition. There are flaws in each one of us that make loyalty more likely, or less likely, to manifest. But I have seen, first hand, the pain that can arise when loyalty is called into doubt. In those cases where loyalty is lost altogether, it is not uncommon for organizations such as ours to splinter, perhaps disintegrate. It is also not uncommon for lives to be lost.

The last Standard Year has brought the loyalty of some of our companions into question. I have addressed issues surrounding the so-called "Cell" in the past, but of late, I have received reports that they might not be quite so extinct as I

had been led to believe. It was my understanding that with the help of the outsiders, Markus and I brought down the Cell and extracted its core leadership from our ranks. That even rumors of its continued existence can reach my ears disturbs me far more than I can express.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to discuss with you both the positive and negative aspects of loyalty. Because disloyalty seems to be at the core of what has occurred of late, let me begin with the drawbacks to being loyal.

Being loyal means, at its core, accepting another individual as being worthy of trust, respect, and some level of obedience. I fully recognize that most of us would not be in the lines of work we have chosen if we were good at any of these things. There are reasons to not trust any given individual we might come across. Even the best of persons might be misled by a false sense of righteousness. Even the kindest, most gentle Jedi might - through some misguided application of a long-established and completely correct principle - engage in activities that cause us to call into doubt whether that Jedi is worthy of our trust.

I have spoken to many of you. Childhood is something distant to us, even those of us who are young, and it was filled with pain. We exist on what society deems its "fringes" because someone, at some point, shunned us from the polite society into which we were born. Or perhaps we have never had a chance at polite society, where trust is the norm. For whatever reason, we are not built to trust, and remaining loyal to anyone - myself included - requires that trust be present. Recognizing this, and knowing that words are empty and that only actions matter, I have made it my mission to not speak of trust but to demonstrate it to you. If you take the time to reflect on the time since the venerable Riboga left Cularin, you will see that our profits are up, our prosecutorial rates are down, and the number of deaths on the job has been reduced by over half. I will not ask you to trust me. I will only ask you to look at the outcomes of my leadership.

Respect is a trickier beast still. The most highly honored Riboga ran things in a fashion in keeping with his home culture, inspiring fear in those around him and leveraging that fear to obtain his desired ends. It was his belief that such measures were the only means of ensuring that you would follow his commands. I prefer to think of you as more highly evolved than that. You are capable of thought and decision-making. I allow you the freedom to choose

your own paths, with the understanding that you will accept the consequences of those choices. Use of force by my administration is limited quite strictly to those instances in which individuals sought to directly undermine and threaten either my own person or others within the Consortium. I have never made force a threat. It is simply part of the bargain. You respect me and the fellows of the Consortium, and I will respect you in return.

It is on obedience, though, where most of us run into problems. Were we good at obeying, we would not spend our lives running blockades, smuggling forbidden wares, and walking in the shadows to keep ourselves from the eyes of the remainder of the world. Yet to follow someone, to allow someone to lead, to be loyal to an individual - any individual - requires some level of obedience. The amount required is inversely proportional to the amount of trust that exists. The more trust, the less stringent the obedience requirements. The less trust, the more obedience is necessary. When I provide you with directives, I expect that they will be followed, but I trust you to make decisions as to how they can best be accomplished. If my directives contain fallacies, it is within your prerogative to point them out to me and ask me to reconsider. I do not require, nor do I even want, blind obedience.

The problem -- for many would consider it a problem, though I do not, particularly - is that by offering you the freedom that I have, I open the door to plotting against my position. I make it easier for groups such as the Cell to function.

Renna's Transport Service

Some local personalities notwithstanding, it has long been the desire of legitimate Cularin news organizations to provide fair, unbiased, and accurate reporting of current events. In that vein, we wish to critically examine the role that Renna's Transport Service (hereafter, RTS) has played in the Cularin economic structure over the past 20 months.

Renna's assistance in the fiasco surrounding House Hirskaala and its uniform theft earned her a great deal of respect in the community, as well as business. The fact that she was immediately able to capitalize on the publicity generated by the Metatheran Cartel's expulsion from the planet by hiring a number of the individuals who were key in gathering evidence and directly combating the Cartel also worked to increase her business nearly tenfold in the space of two short months.

It has been asked, by a number of individuals throughout the system, how it was that Renna came to be in such a perfect place, at such a perfect time. There is always the possibility that it was luck. In a universe that allows for an infinite number of possible actions and consequences, there will be times that fortune favors an individual to the nth degree. But these occurrences should be so few and far between that we should be very careful in attributing to chance what could be attributed to scheming manipulation.

We certainly do not wish to accuse Renna of any untoward activities. It is simply our desire to put forth the facts and allow the reader to make his or her own decision. But we believe that there is compelling evidence to suggest that, perhaps, someone should take a closer look at the business Renna is running. She would also be well advised to come forward and explain what it is we have observed over the last year.

Fact: RTS has grown 500 percent in 20 months. Its staff has outstripped the building that housed the transport service twice, and the operating budget is in excess of 100,000 dataries per year - a sizable increase from the 20,000 datary operating budget at the beginning of the prior year. The profit margin for RTS has also increased, as the cost of security in the system has risen astronomically in the wake of increased pirate activity, increased Cartel transport activity, and a rather impolite series of questions being asked about the Thaereian Military. This growth period in RTS coincided precisely with any number of other changes, so it is impossible to separate all the possible causes.

Consider this fact, however: In the same 20-month period, no other transport service has seen growth in excess of 100 percent. Business is up everywhere, and secure transport and delivery is valued, but no one is making quite so much money off it as Renna. We say, "Show us your books." Let us see where these increased profits came from. In the absence of hard data to support the increase in profitability, there are many who suggest that Renna is using her business as a front and the legitimate heroes of Cularin as a means of protecting herself from investigation. We cannot speak to the veracity of these suggestions, but they are certainly troubling.

Fact: RTS does not offer significantly better pricing structures than any other transport service in the system and, in fact, charges a slightly higher rate (in goods shipped in metric tons) than other shipping and transit concerns. The quality of the RTS fleet, though, is not substantially better than the fleet of any other transport house in Cularin, nor are its pilots or guards appreciably better-

trained. What, then, is the difference in cost? Why should we believe that consumers are willing to pay so much more for a product that is no different from what they can get anywhere else? The name may play a part, but there is much more to safe transport of goods than just a name, and the people of Cularin are smarter than to be taken in by a cheap name recognition game. Again - we want to see the books. We want evidence that people really are paying this much for a service that is not meaningfully different from what they could get almost anywhere else in the system.

Fact: A large number of "legitimate" businesses in the system have ties to Nirama's smuggling organization. It is rumored that such businesses may have an easier time obtaining questionable goods and may be able to get their own goods in and out of the system more easily than might otherwise be the case. While we certainly have no hard evidence that Renna has aligned herself with Nirama, it would pose more than a small ethical problem if she had. The line between legitimate transport and smuggling is drawn very clearly in the minds of the people of Cularin, if not in the laws themselves. We would be very interested in reviewing manifests from Renna's flights, compare them with the market rates for what was shipped, and then decide whether the goods that RTS is bringing in are likely to fall within "acceptable" ranges.

The facts are the facts. They more than speak for themselves. We do not accuse Renna of any definite wrongdoing. RTS simply may have been lucky. It may have been the right company, in the right place, at the right time, making the right hiring decisions. It is also possible, though, that RTS represents a link to Cularin's criminal underworld -- and this possibility should not continue to go unchecked.

The Creaking Gate

. . . we interrupt your normally scheduled holo-feed for this special announcement. Please stand by for a critical announcement regarding the safety of Cularin and our many peoples. We appreciate your patience in understanding the need to interrupt your normal activities for this special announcement. Please stand by . . .

Fade in. The studios of Cularin Central Broadcasting are in an uproar. Paper copy lies strewn across the desk usually occupied by Yara Grugara, and the normally blue screen behind her chair is scrolling text at a remarkable rate. A disheveled Yara is shoved quite forcibly into view, her hair a mess, her make-up

only half-applied, leaving her with black rings around her eyes, but no bright colors whatsoever. She glares momentarily at the large, hairy arm that shoved her into the camera's view, then takes a seat and picks up one of several hundred sheets of paper, straightening it as she tries to find her spot on the teleprompter. She forces a smile, but it looks as though she is in pain.

Yara

Friends, this is Yara Grugara, reporting on matters most distressing.

She pauses, squinting at the teleprompter that must be right beneath the camera, and gulps loudly enough that the microphone on her shirt captures and amplifies the sound.

Yara

It appears that, in the time we were cut off from the remainder of the galaxy, the Thaereian Military was putting into place a number of safeguards on their own planets. Given their proximity . . .

She stops as someone hands her a glass of water from off camera. She takes a sip and picks up a different piece of paper to straighten as she again searches for her place on the teleprompter.

Yara

Given their proximity, it is conceivable that they have amassed substantial power while we were - well, wherever we were. Under the rubric of self-defense from whatever it was that seemed to so completely annihilate us, they have more than quadrupled their military power, and over the past several weeks, have slowly put into place a perimeter around Cularin. They have also moved more ships into the system, including - that can't be right.

Yara's fingers close around the paper she has been holding for support, her knuckles growing white. The paper rips in two and she looks down at it, then reaches up to adjust her earpiece.

Yara

No, that can't be right.

She releases her grip on the two half-sheets of paper, which are now little more

than crumpled messes, and picks up a small stack of papers. She begins to straighten them mechanically as she looks back to the teleprompter.

Yara

They have also moved more ships into the system, including a pair of capital ships that apparently are hidden deep within the clouds of Genarius. This information is preliminary, and as yet unconfirmed, but reliable sources indicate that the capital ships may be part of a larger force that is being moved into the system. Given the recent - for us, at least - revelation of the hidden base of operations established within the system by the Thaereian Military establishment, local government and militia sources are moving to alert status. No official word has been received, as yet, from the Thaereians. It is expected that a denial will be forthcoming quickly, if at all. Commander Osten Dal'Nay, of the Cularin Militia, has issued the following statement on behalf of the militia.

The screen flickers, then the youthful face of Osten Dal'Nay appears. He looks as serious as a rancor about to feed.

Osten

People of Cularin, let me assure you that your militia stands ready in case a crisis ensues. While we have not had as much time as the Thaereians to prepare for conflict, we are confident that our officers and soldiers and all those who have sought to serve the system will do so to the best of their ability. Do not panic. It is possible that this is nothing, but we will treat it as a threat until we have reason to do otherwise. Be ready - but do not be angry. Do not give in to that darkness. We will work together, and, if the Force is with us, we will prevail.

He says nothing for several seconds, and the screen flickers back to Yara. Her hair has been pulled up in a tight, quick bun, and she looks slightly more composed. She has no more make-up on than she did before, but her face appears to be at least somewhat more relaxed.

Yara

Friends, this is a trying time. Commander Dal'Nay is right. We can't allow ourselves to panic. I encourage all of you to remain calm, in the face of this cri -

- this potential crisis. We --

She looks to her left, nods, and then turns her attention to the camera once more.

Yara

I've just received word that a statement has been received by CCB from Colonel - I beg your pardon, he's apparently been promoted in the time since we last heard from him - Admiral Jir Tramsig. He sent no video, only a statement that he asked be read.

She takes a deep breath and squints at the teleprompter.

Yara

(reading)

"Citizens of Cularin, on behalf of the people of Thaere, I wish to assure you that our military is not now, nor has it ever been, a threat to your well-being. We exist for your protection, and the protection of other systems. Rumors of ships smuggled into your system are preposterous. Rumors of hidden bases are so exaggerated as to be farcical."

Yara snorts, then covers her mouth and nose and looks abashedly at the camera before continuing.

Yara

(still reading)

"We have recently begun a series of maneuvers organized to provide a stronger barrier to the Cularin system, to prevent a repeat of the previous near-disaster. It is quite likely that any source claiming ill will on our part has simply misinterpreted our actions. I wish you all good evening, and may the Force be with you."

Yara frowns at the teleprompter, then looks back to the camera while adjusting her earpiece.

Yara

Friends, I don't know about you, but I smell a womp-rat. I've been told that the Militia has yet to stand down, and that ships throughout the system continue

to be on alert. We will keep you apprised of any changes to the situation . . .

Fade out.

Trade and Trade Alike

Public relations. It's all PR in the world of corporations and slimy trading consortia, and it took the Metatheran Cartel a long time to figure this out. Having recognized the "unfortunate occurrences" under the leadership of Velin Wir in Cularin, the Cartel has been attempting to put forth a good image to the public eye by sponsoring Podraces and engaging in various minor charitable activities. A recent ad campaign, featuring a too-familiar, too-happy, too-bizarre image of Thurm Loogg in the middle of a grain field, not only captures the essence of the Cartel's new attempt to present itself favorably, but also presents a piece of information that many citizens of Cularin found dubious, at best.

Hello, citizens of Cularin! I am Thurm Loogg, chief trade envoy to the Cularin system for the omnibenevolent Metatheran Cartel. It has come to our attention that a great many of our initiatives -- things that have significantly benefited Cularin -- have been twisted into awful, awful things, through a series of circumstances so unfortunate as to almost defy belief. But the Cartel has never had anything other than the best interests of Cularin at heart. The Cartel loves Cularin! You have been good to us in so many ways, and it would be silly for us to never return the goodness and love you have shown us.

Many of you are aware that we have been sponsoring Podracing in the system. The Cartel loves Podraces! We appreciate the vigor and excitement of the sport and enjoy watching you shoot at one another.

That is a joke! The Cartel does **not** love it when you shoot at one another!

Podracing is very festive. It brings out the best in the competitors of Cularin, and it allows us to reward those of you who have worked so hard to protect your beloved home from any perceived threats. I am only sorry that some of you do not seem to believe in the goodness that is in our hearts and in the love we bear each and every one of the citizens of Cularin.

Even our gifts to the system are often misconstrued. We have yet to capture

the scoundrels who planted the transmitter aboard the ship we so graciously gifted you, but the evidence is such that we cannot help but conclude that someone was intent on making our offering into a threat. How cruel of the individual or group responsible! We have long suspected that the criminal element in Cularin has been set on undermining our operations, and this horrid attack on our glowing record smells greatly of criminals.

It was with some surprise that we learned of changes in the overall philosophy and strategic direction of the Metatheran Cartel during Cularin's strange absence. It was decided, at the highest levels of the organization, that perhaps one of the reasons we have enjoyed such mixed acceptance among the very people we see ourselves most directly serving is that you have no stake in our success or our failure. We have traditionally operated in a purely private capacity, and during my personal absence from the strategic planning commission, the group reached one of the wisest decisions in recent memory. It is therefore my pleasure to announce that, beginning in the new year, the Metatheran Cartel will be opening itself to public investment.

If you ever wondered what it was like to be part of so grand and wondrous an enterprise as the Metatheran Cartel, now is your time! We will be offering, at first in limited quantities, the opportunity to purchase shares of the Cartel. As we prosper, so will you prosper! It is the chance of a lifetime, this chance to buy into the Cartel, to become part of our grand and glorious organization that has spread throughout the galaxy. We are certain that if you do not buy in, your neighbors will buy up all the shares immediately. You do not want to be the only person in Cularin without a stake in the Metatheran Cartel, do you?

I know what you are saying. "But Chief Envoy Loogg, I do not make a great deal of money. How can I afford to purchase a piece of the wonderful Metatheran Cartel?" To this, we would point out that there are many ways in which you might make extra credits. We love when people work harder, so that they have more money to spend! Or, if you do not want to work harder, you could simply rob Cularin Central Finance.

That is also a joke! We do **not** love it when you rob Cularin Central Finance!

Perhaps you are saying, "But I am a Jedi, I do not make much money because my calling is much nobler than mere money. How can I afford to purchase a piece of the noble Metatheran Cartel?" The Cartel would **love** to have Jedi working for it, and if you wish to be part of our noble enterprise, we will be

happy to discuss future employment opportunities with the Cartel once your training is complete. We are always in need of skilled negotiators, and you may one day decide that a more formal employment is to your liking. If so, the Cartel may be right for you!

However you do it, though, we encourage you to consider the investment. We have long been a part of Cularin, and now, Cularin can truly be a part of us. There is only so much growth that can occur in a system like Cularin without a strong, deep tie to the economic community. Similarly, there is only so much the Cartel can do without the acceptance of the people of Cularin.

So begin saving now, and when the Metatheran Cartel is open to public investment -- spend, spend, spend! And remember --

The Cartel loves you!

Rebirth

This month marks the first birthday of the leviathan calves that were birthed beneath the crystalline waters of Dorumaa. As far as anyone in Cularin knows, these calves represent the last of their species, and as a result, they have drawn attention from across the galaxy. Many naturalist and environmental groups were actually more upset about the disappearance of the calves than they were about the disappearance of Cularin as a whole, since, as they pointed out, "There are lots of Humans and Sullustans and Wookiees in the galaxy, but there are only two of those calves!" As a result, the Alliance for the Creation of Habitable Environments took a great interest in the Cularin situation and poured money from its own coffers into research to help in bringing the system back.

One of the steps they took was the creation of a documentary about the calves and their mother, a large portion of which was a recreation of the rescue of the calves -- with a great deal of dramatic license. The following is an excerpt from the documentary, hosted by the Kel Dor xenobiologist A. Rahring. Dr. Rahring is well regarded in the field and had begun the documentary prior to the disappearance of the calves. During their absence, he did a great deal more research and came up with some startling insights about the creatures.

Welcome back to "A Galaxy Befuddled." Over the last two hours, I've offered you glimpses into the way these wondrous sea creatures live, and I've discussed the strange disappearance of their mother. It must have been particularly hard for the youngsters to have to face the oceans of Dorumaa without her, and no survey craft has yet been able to find a trace of her existence. Some claim that she didn't survive the birthing and rescue of her calves, but if this is the case, where is her corpse? Others claim that she may have been whisked away by those who would profit from her disappearance, but if this is the case, why not take a calf, which would be much easier to transport? This is one of the mysteries before us.

There is a third possibility that may or may not bear further exploration. Cularin has always been a place very strong in the Force. It maintains a precarious balance, in terms both of the species present and of the political, social, and economic pressures that exist in such a small region. While the calves have not, to our knowledge, shown any hint of Force sensitivity, is it not possible that the reason their mother was able to survive, frozen, for so many centuries, was that she entered some version of what the Jedi term a "Force trance?" It might be possible that she has done this again, and somehow rendered herself undetectable as a life form. Now, I'm no Jedi, only a simple xenobiologist, but I suggest that there may be something to this theory. If these creatures truly are sensitive to the Force, how much we could learn from them!

The calves present a special challenge. Thus far, Titon (the female) and Jessel (the male; these are the names my team assigned them, since if the calves actually have names, they have yet to reveal them to us) have done admirably in taking care of themselves. They also show a remarkable affinity for one another, but not so much that they are inseparable. In fact, they are apart nearly as much as they are together. They roam the seas of Dorumaa, sometimes separated by as much as a thousand kilometers, but we have observed, on a number of occasions, them turning simultaneously and starting toward one another. They meet precisely, and then swim off together to search the oceans more completely.

It had been hoped that the team reporting in from Cularin collected a great deal of data during their absence, but as it turns out, the entire system was a mass of nothingness, a moment that passed before the citizens even knew they were gone. Thus, most (perhaps all) of the research that we accomplished during the time that Cularin was in absentia was done outside the system.

Over the course of the past decade, we have sought any evidence regarding the nature of the leviathan calves. We have explored the watery depths of places like Naboo and found nothing that seems to match the sentience and kindness of these gigantic creatures. We have examined what little genetic material we could obtain from the calves, and we have deduced that the conditions on Dorumaa, and the creatures with whom they share those seas, are not such that they could have evolved in that climate. They must have been brought to that world at some point far in the past. The obvious questions are, "By whom?" and "To what end?"

One of these questions is answered (or so we believe) when we examine the body shape of the leviathan calves.

A diagram fills the screen. At the top of the diagram is Titon. At the bottom is a smooth-lined starship. Titon's image moves atop the image of the starship, and the match is almost perfect.

As you can see, the body structure of the calf is very, very close to that of this Mon Calamari-designed ship. We have yet to obtain hard data to prove that these creatures exist on the Mon Calamari homeworld, but it is possible that they may, and it is entirely likely that if they do not reside there now, they did at some point in the past.

What is puzzling about this is that the Mon Cal norm is not to travel or populate other planets, but instead to stay home and keep themselves away from the prying eyes of outsiders. If we are correct, and these calves are part of a species that evolved on the Mon Calamari homeworld, that still leaves the mystery of why their progenitors were taken from their homes and brought to Cularin. This question is difficult to answer without knowing when the transportation occurred, but we continue to look into the issue.

It is time for another break. When we return, we will bring you recent footage of the calves, the first images of Titon and Jessel since the disappearance of Cularin.

Shadow Droids

Most of the pirate groups of the Cularin system have a very set operating procedure. While it varies from the Brotherhood to the Blood Velkurs to any of the nameless dozen other loose organizations that exist in the system, most of them share at least one common characteristic -- the most critical work is

always relegated to the most experienced pilots and gunners. Of late, reports have surfaced that this might be changing. Droids have been observed piloting pirate vessels, making deliveries, picking up shipments, and doing all the things that one might reasonably conclude should be done by organics. That the droids have been entrusted with such duties could mean several things, but most agree that the two primary possibilities are quite unpleasant. First, the work might be so dangerous that it is given to droids, who are by their nature expendable and replaceable. Second, the droids might be significantly more advanced than anything their creators on Uffel have let the public become aware of. . .

While the cantinas of Cularin do not prohibit droids, as a rule, a number frown on the presence of automatons within their environs. Part of this is simply a matter of atmosphere; the cantina is a lively place, full of laughter and drink. Most droids are not programmed for laughter, and drinking will, at best, short them out. They tend to be quite stolid and, in many senses, boring compared to the typical cantina denizen.

It was in just such a cantina, then, that OPS elected to begin its investigation. Using a microtransceiver to relay signals to the central OPS location, an undercover agent transmitted the following snippets of conversation that were deemed potentially relevant to understanding the role of the droids in current pirate activities.

OPS: "Hey, barkeep -- Rodian ale?"

A sound of a glass sliding along the bar follows, and then a gentle "glug, glug."

OPS: "So, anything new around here? I notice you've kept this place droid-free. Good to see."

?: "Not sanitary, danged things. Leak oil all over my floor. Disrupt sensors. It's easier to just leave them out in the cold than it is to deal with all their hassles."

OPS: "Yeah, I hear you."

Another "glug, glug."

OPS: "You know what I can't figure?"

?: "What's that?"

OPS: "I can't figure why anyone would let one of those things pilot a ship. Why would you want to trust your life to a droid, of all things? A droid!"

??: "They're not letting those things fly commercial liners, are they? You know you can't trust those machines. They always break down at the worst time. I mean, look at this here spigot. I tap it sometimes, and ale comes out. I tap it other times, and I get a rush of air that smells like the back half of a bantha. And it's just a spigot -- droids got lots more parts than this. Lots more parts. Easier to break 'em down."

OPS: "Never heard of a droid flying a commercial ship. But I hear some of them are flying . . . private vessels?"

There is a sound of something sliding across the bar.

OPS: "Know anyone who might know about droid pilots?"

Long pause.

??: "Why would anyone want to know about things you just can't trust?"

OPS: "I have some . . ."

A sound of something else sliding across the bar.

OPS: ". . . business arrangements to make. Things droids might be good for. You know anyone who might know about droid pilots?"

??: "Heard you the first time. Yeah. I think I might. Check the corner booth. Ask him about shipping and receiving. But don't mention I sent you over."

A long pause follows, and the sound of footsteps.

OPS: "I hear you're into shipping and receiving."

???: "Dat's dependin'. Whatta yousa wantin' ta know?"

OPS: "I have some goods that need to be shipped. I need a specialist who can meet my unique needs."

???: "Meesa not dinkin' yousa gots any bombad uniquer needs. Meesa dinkin' yousa gots da same needs dat alla udder people's gots. Yousa needs ta make da credits, but yousa not knowin' how ta do dat. My knowin' how."

OPS: "I'm thinking I need some droids to do the transporting."

???: "Mechaneeks? Why yousa wanna use bombad mechaneeks, when meesa gots all kinda okieday transports? Yousa not affordin' real peoples?"

OPS: "Let's just say I've heard good things about droids lately. That they might be useful."

???: "Let's ussen say dat yousa askin' bombad dangerous questions. Da mechaneeks not good news. No, deysa bombad ugly news."

OPS: "What do you mean?"

???: "Meesa meanin' what meesa sayin'. Mechaneeks? Bombad. Meesa canna make it more easy dan dat. Yousa want sumpin' shipped? Yousa come to da right place. Yousa want mechaneeks? Yousa needs ta find someone else. Meesa don't play dat."

OPS: "Why not? Is there something wrong with the droids? Can't they pilot just fine? I mean, you can program them to do almost anything you want, right?"

???: "Yessa, da mechaneeks, dey can be given da bombaddest programmin'. But dat's not makin' dem good. Yousa askin' mya doughs? Meesa dinkin', sumpin's bombad wrong wid da droids dat's doin' da pilotin'. Mya seen some. Deysa nuttin' but trouble. Red eyes, and havin' too many of da fingers."

OPS: "But are they good at piloting?"

???: "Da mechaneeks, day as good as almost any bombad pilot in da system. Dat don't mean day gonna be good ta use. Just means day gonna fly straight."

OPS: "So what's wrong with them? What's so bad about wanting to use droids to do some of the work?"

???: "See, yousa confuzzed. Yousa dinkin' all mechaneeks is like all mechaneeks. Not all mechaneeks like all da udders. Some of dem, deysa made bombad evil. Yousa not wantin' ta get in da way of bombad evil mechaneeks."

OPS: "Evil? But droids can't be evil. Droids can't be anything other than what they're programmed to be. I think you're trying to scare me into using your product."

???: "Mya dinkin', yousa asked enough questions. Mya dinkin', yousa not gonna be good business."

There is a clicking sound, not unlike the safety catch being deactivated on a blaster pistol.

???: "Mya dinkin', yousa needs ta be goin' now."

Further Discussions With Lanius

The perspective of the Jedi who live in the Cularin system is something that interests a great many of the citizens of the region. Perhaps none so uniquely embody the Jedi as does the headmaster of the Almas Academy, Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk.

Master Lanius was kind enough to grant us an interview on one occasion in the past, and the discussion was enthusiastically received by both Jedi and non-Jedi readers. We contacted Master Lanius and requested a few more minutes of his time. To our great surprise and delight, he offered to have another of the senior Jedi at the Academy sit in, Master Kirlocca.

Kirlocca is the Wookiee who serves as Master of Lightsabers at the Academy. He remains an enigmatic figure who, according to his students, possesses a unique combination of strength and finesse. Watching Master Kirlocca fight has been described as "like watching water flow over the falls," among other colorful metaphors. His life prior to entering the Jedi Order is not a matter he typically discusses, although before being brought to the Jedi at a young age, he had already begun training to defend the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk and was becoming versed in the arts of combat. This early training served him well when he was brought into the Jedi fold, allowing him perspective and discipline that would continue to guide him throughout his life.

We met with Masters Lanius and Kirlocca in Master Lanius's chambers. If it were possible to find anything more unsettling than interviewing a Jedi Master, we would have to say it's interviewing two Jedi Masters.

Master Lanius, Master Kirlocca - good afternoon. I hope you are both well today.

L: I'm quite well, thank you. K (via hovering translator droid): I am well.

Excellent. So, tell me - there's been a lot of talk about a group opposed to the Jedi arising in Cularin. Is there any truth to this matter?

L: There are always those who oppose the Jedi. Nothing new there. The universe has a light side and a dark side, and without the darkness, the light has no meaning.

We've heard talk of "the Believers." What can you tell us about them?

K: May I? [Master Lanius nods.] K: The "Believers" are a group of individuals devoted to the study and practice of the dark side of the Force. They are misguided.

How big of a threat are they?

K: They are only as big a threat as we allow them to be. L: Any group that utilizes the Force for its own ends, rather than for the betterment of the galaxy, is a threat to all of us. There is much power to be gained through the abuse of the Force. It can come easily.

All right. How big of an immediate threat are they? How many "Believers" are there?

L: Clouded, their numbers are. [He and Kirlocca look at each other and inexplicably start chuckling.] K: What Lanius means is that we aren't certain. A number have been captured already, but it is equally plausible that there are hundreds or thousands more, or that we have found all of them in the system. Those we have found so far have been less than cooperative.

So you can't just, well, wave your hand at them and make them tell the truth?

K: If they knew the truth, we could. L: And if they didn't believe that telling us would get them killed. We cannot compel them to do something they believe would lead to their own deaths.

I suppose that wouldn't be a very "Jedi" thing to do. So does this have something to do with that Sith thing, on the far side of the planet?

L: The fortress is very troubling, but we have a great deal to learn about it, still.

K: The dark side remains strong there, even after centuries.

I'd gathered as much. Is it true that excavations are underway there?

[The two Masters look at each other.] K: It is a place of great energy. Given recent activities in the system, it would be foolish of us not to provide the location with the attention it deserves.

The activities of the "Believers?"

K: Of any who would use the Force for their own gains.

So there are more than just the "Believers" in Cularin?

L: Perhaps. If we could detect all those who wish to harm others, they would be captured and detained - and, where possible, rehabilitated. It is unrealistic to think that we have identified all the potential threats.

You're saying that you don't know?

L: That's exactly what I'm saying.

But aren't Jedi supposed to be all-knowing?

K: We're still as mortal as anyone else. We can make mistakes. Being a Jedi does not make one better than any other person in the galaxy. It provides certain responsibilities, which coincide with the abilities we are granted through the Force. We are not infallible.

Fair enough. What about reports of a large mission to Coruscant?

L: The mission was completed successfully. K: We are very pleased with the response of our Padawans and the other citizens of Cularin who assisted in the effort.

I don't suppose you could tell me what that was about?

L: You would be correct.

Are you being evasive?

L: Are you asking questions that might jeopardize system security?

Um . . . so, what are your thoughts about the most recent events here in the system? How do the visitors from Coruscant change things?

K: May I? [Lanius nods.] K: Change is inevitable. It is impossible to be completely prepared for the changes that affect us most. We can only prepare as best we can and hope that our wisdom and experience will be enough to guide us through.

That's rather a cryptic answer.

L: Yes. And I could not have said it better myself. K: Thank you, my friend.

And with that, the Masters excused themselves to co-teach a seminar -- most likely on the power of confusion, if this writer had to venture a guess . . .

Celebrate SoroSuub

Every year, SoroSuub holds a grand celebration on Tolea Biqua to mark the anniversary of the production of the first of its Cannibalizers in the Edic Bar facility. This year, with everything that has happened in Cularin, SoroSuub has grander plans than ever, and the attention brought to Cularin by its re-emergence into the galaxy guarantees that attendance from outside the system will be at an all-time high. In a galaxy at war, people need a chance to relax. What follows is a detailed press release from SoroSuub's offices on Edic Bar . . .

It is with great joy that the SoroSuub Corporation announces the renewal of our annual Cularin celebration. While for those of us in Cularin, there has been no lag, we recognize that those of you outside Cularin may have made other plans. We encourage you to cancel those plans and join us once more on Tolea Biqua as we commemorate the production of the first of our Cannibalizers. With the blessings of our center on Sullust, we have invested most heavily in creating a pleasing and exciting atmosphere for the event, and we are certain that you will not be disappointed.

Traditional favorite events will go on as ever. We will have racing for those of you who thrive on danger, and test flights in new models -- those produced in our Edic Bar facilities and several from other locations around the galaxy -- to demonstrate the breadth and quality of products offered by SoroSuub. The famous attractions of Tolea Biqua will be open to the public as well, though we do encourage those of you with a familial orientation to choose wisely in selecting establishments to frequent. To that end, we are offering child-care services at a modest fee on Ipsus, through cooperation with our good friends at Naescorcom. Those of you who cannot find child-care in your home systems can feel free to bring the children along, safe in the knowledge that you will be able to put them into capable hands once you arrive. The nature of entertainment on Tolea Biqua makes it unlikely to suit most families, though if you deem it right for your children, by all means, bring them along!

Gambling, as always, is encouraged on Tolea Biqua. SoroSuub is supportive of the various gambling endeavors that the city has to offer, though we must insist that you check the guidebook provided when you arrive. It lists the various establishments, along with their minimum bets, collection policies, and drink quotas. We believe that you must find a gambling establishment that suits your personal needs in order to obtain the maximum possible enjoyment from your time in Tolea Biqua.

In addition, this year we will hold a pageant to choose the loveliest individual in all of Cularin. Entrants from outside the system are certainly allowed, though such entries will be limited due to the nature of the competition. It would be odd indeed for the loveliest individual in Cularin to live outside the system, after all. The pageant will include a fashion competition, a talent competition (though we have strictly forbidden all forms of dancing that involve the use of body parts not available to all species, in order to prevent advantaging the Twi'leks yet again), a cooking competition, and a droid repair competition. Entrants will be judged on style, grace, and dexterity, and we encourage creativity. Our judges have traveled the galaxy extensively and have seen most of the appetizing presentations a pageant contestant can make, and they come to Cularin in search of something with unique local flavor. What is that flavor? We leave it to you, the entrants.

The bars of Tolea Biqua will be serving the finest of beverages, doing their part in celebrating the Cannibalizer's anniversary. Perhaps more importantly, though, this year we have the chance to celebrate Cularin herself, her re-emergence from that non-place that hid us from view for so long, and we

believe this to be a prime opportunity for a rediscovery of this wonderful system and all it has to offer. To that end, during the first and last nights of the celebration, all drinks will be courtesy of SoroSuub! We encourage you to come to Cularin and enjoy yourselves, for there is no finer place in all the galaxy.

Excursions are planned, weather permitting, into the clouds of Genarius. The storm at our previous celebration left many celebrants wary of the environment, fearing some level of hostility that we cannot and should not ascribe to this wonderful planet. We will offer tours of Edic Bar, Varna Biqua, and Friz Harammel, and there are rumors of local guides organizing tours of the area surrounding Nub Saar, though these would certainly not be sanctioned by SoroSuub. The abandoned city of Nub Saar, rumored for years to be inhabited by the spirits of those who perished in the great storms shortly after this first city of Genarius was constructed, is strictly off-limits to traffic, and it would not be in the best interests of anyone to risk life and limb to see such a place. SoroSuub would never involve itself in such ventures, but it is our responsibility to inform our likely patrons that such offers may be extended by individuals not affiliated with SoroSuub.

For those of you who worry about celebrating in such dangerous times, we can assure you that the finest of security forces have been retained to assist in protecting Tolea Biqua from anything untoward. Admiral Jir Tramsig of the Thaereian military has graciously offered troop support for the celebration, and while we have turned him down, the offer was certainly most kind. Security will be handled jointly through the Cularin Militia and several local private security firms. We at SoroSuub are committed to the safety and well-being of our guests and have spared no expense to make this the greatest celebration ever.

You will doubtless have questions about these events and the many other elements of our celebration. As is traditional, we will have the midnight flyover of the first of the Cannibalizers, followed by much debauchery and carousing. We have done away with the clothing-optional portions of the celebration as a result of the Wookiee-stripping incident of three years ago (or thirteen years ago, if you are not from Cularin). We remind you that the purpose of the celebration is joy, fun, and the chance to experience something new and exciting.

That is why the celebration has found its home on Tolea Biqua. And that is why SoroSuub is proud to continue to support it, after all these years.

Yours,

Miim Te'Suub
Director of Formal Activities
SoroSuub Corporation -- Edic Bar

That Is Nirama's Word

How he managed to get access to an all-channels broadcast is unclear, but shortly before lunchtime today, the crime lord Nirama broadcast an angry warning to a number of groups he feels are endangering Cularin. Given the upheaval in his organization, many individuals in the system have been left wondering how much of his statement is truth, and how much of it is posturing for public approval. The question we must ask about this rather unique four-eyed individual is what this kind of posturing would actually gain him.

The broadcast consisted of Nirama, seated in a chair in front of a blue screen. He spoke, said what he wanted to say, and then all channels resumed their standard programming. A large number of individuals and groups in the system recorded the message, and it is reproduced here in its entirety.

Citizens, I am Nirama. Many of you know me by reputation alone. I am what you might call a lord of crime. I have command of the largest smuggling guild in Cularin, and am at the center of the black markets for several systems. There are many of you who find my work distasteful, who believe that I am an individual who wallows in darkness and has anger and hatred in his heart. These things are not true. I certainly understand where the ideas came from, but they are inaccurate.

I come to you today - and I must apologize for the manner in which I come to you, since I am loathe to interrupt the workings of daily life in Cularin, but without some interruption, I fear that my message would go unheard - to speak to you about this system that we call "home." I have spent several decades in Cularin, first as an underling of Riboga the Hutt, and later as the individual I have become. I have a great fondness for Cularin. It is my home, in every sense of the word. That I live in the asteroid belt and make my living through the transport and sale of oft-illegal goods does not make me any less concerned about what is happening around me.

Many of you recognize that Cularin is in trouble. My people and I have watched the degradation of the situation in the system with no small amount of interest, and have engaged in small activities of our own to alleviate potential problems. However, our efforts alone will not be sufficient to stop the dark tide that has begun to rise throughout Cularin and threatens to wash away all that we love.

I am loathe to wax poetic about Cularin. It is not in my nature. I am not a creature of poetry; I am a creature of fact. I want nothing so much as to be completely honest with you about the situation, and where my people and I stand.

It has always been my intention to make Cularin a vital part of the Republic. To that end, I assisted in expediting Riboga's departure from the system. I have provided order where the Hutt sowed chaos. I have worked to keep the pirate factions fighting amongst themselves, rather than attacking you. I have increased trade - both legitimate and otherwise - in the system. I have helped the galaxy to recognize that Cularin is a place of great value. All of these are good things.

There will always be those, however, who seek to exploit a system like Cularin. To those, I issue the following warning: If you wish to do harm to Cularin, you must first go through me.

To the Thaereian Navy: Admiral Tramsig, you and your bantha-fondling pseudo-soldiers should stop toying with the people of Cularin. You claim to be a "peace-keeping" force. Why, then, are you here? The people of Cularin have thus far been spared the horror of the Clone Wars. Is there a threat that you have elected not to share with us? If so, I urge you to reconsider. If not, then perhaps you should withdraw your troops. Immediately. Go and fight real battles, and leave our borders alone. All that you and your troops have done so far is interfere with trade -- although not with the Metatheran Cartel's trade; isn't that odd? -- and harass the good people of this system. How you managed to suppress the public outrage over your hidden base on Tilnes, I cannot guess. I suppose enough guns that are large enough will suppress just about anything. If you do not stop acting against the people of Cularin, you will suffer. That is Nirama's word.

To the Metatheran Cartel: I am uncertain of your loyalties. Loogg, I have never trusted your smile. When you smile and proclaim your loyalty to the Republic, I

hear lies in your voice. But then, Loogg, I have yet to hear truth in your voice. You have walked the edge of a lightsaber blade for some time. I would be less concerned if I did not believe that a misstep would not kill you, but rather, would make two of you where before there was only one. Do not think you can fool all of the people of Cularin with your promises and your free beverages. You cannot. If you harm Cularin, you will know pain the likes of which you have never experienced. That is Nirama's word.

To my former employees: You know who you are, and if you remain in this system, having betrayed me, you are only exacerbating your initial foolishness. I do not care what you think you are or what kind of power you believe you have. You have betrayed me. You have killed innocents. If I find you, I will kill you myself. That is Nirama's word.

To Alina Impeveri: Born of politics, you simply cannot get enough of the lies and deceit, can you? I cannot blame your father -- the parent often sacrifices control of the child, in the interest of allowing them to grow. I have heard much of you, but you, at least, have been wise enough to steer clear of me. I encourage you to continue to do so. If you act against Cularin, you will bring my wrath down upon yourself. That is Nirama's word.

To Rufus Trammel: You are still here. I am not sure where, or why, but you have not left the system. If you have decided to throw in your lot with those who would harm this system, I will feed you to something with many very dull teeth that chews slowly. That is Nirama's word.

To Senator Wren and the Jedi of Almas: From what I have seen, you have the best interests of the system at heart. If you need assistance against those who seek to subvert our home, you need only call. We all stand a much better chance if we unite against these threats than if we stand alone. As the many heroes our system has produced have already seen, a single individual may be competent, but a group that understands one another and works in concert can become unstoppable.

This is my home. I do not like what I see being done to it, and I will do everything in my power to keep Cularin safe. That is Nirama's word.

Winter Fantasy Preview

Cularin has changed in ways no one could have predicted. The dark side -- always a threat, particularly with so many current and future Jedi present -- has lashed out, warping everything it touches, creating dissension and anger, fear and mistrust, hatred and suffering. Now, , the galaxy is at war, and there are many forces at work.

It has been a long, long time since all was well in Cularin. Master Lanius has sensed a disturbance in the Force, and he has communicated to me, on many occasions, that he is not certain how the disturbance may be resolved. Since we emerged from that non-space, or whatever it was, that the dark side created to pocket us away from the remainder of the universe, I have spent much time in meditation.

It is not my natural way, to sit and wait. I have always favored action over inaction. It is one of my flaws. But I will continue to meditate until I have come to some deeper understanding of the business of the system.

A great deal of pain emanates from the Tarasin settlements on Cularin. It seems apparent that all is not well there, but the Tarasin have long tended to keep to themselves when things went badly. I cannot blame their mistrust of outsiders. It was, after all, outsiders who cut their ch'hala trees, and outsiders who instigated the bloody and unfortunate uprising several years ago. The Jedi have maintained good relations with them, but the failing health of Mother Dariana threatens to remove one of the unifying elements of the system. She is a truly good individual who has seen the path of darkness and has denied its power over her. She is a model that more Jedi could justifiably choose to follow.

So much anger I sense in my students. I speak with them, and then they go out into the world and use their anger against others. I can sense the dark side growing in some of them, but for every one we send from the Academy, two more pop up with the potential to cause trouble. The students must learn to police their own; they will not always have us around, and if they begin losing their fellows to the dark side, they must understand that they, too, are a step closer to the darkness. All of us must work to understand the sources of anger, and to work past such negative emotions.

There are rumors that the Believers have brought another fallen Jedi to their cause. How they find so many, I do not know. How few we lost, for so long, and now, how many we have seen! I hope that our Padawans and our Knights can

find the strength and skill to do what must be done, and to keep the system safe.

It would be easier, I suppose, if we could stop the trappings of life. It would be easier if we could put a moratorium on gatherings, meetings, and celebrations. But life must go on, and we must watch, protect, and serve the will of the Force. I have a bad feeling, though, about many of the upcoming gatherings in Cularin. That we are suddenly "back" does not mean it is a good idea for everyone to come here. That novelty provides too good a cover for those who wish to do ill.

I must meditate on these thoughts.

-- from Master Kirlocca's personal logs

A Mother's Memoirs

Dariana, Mother of the Hiironi, has been ill for some time. She has seen as much, and done as much, as any Tarasin alive today -- with the possible exception of her older sister, Liriana. Unlike her sister, though, Dariana still believes in the innate goodness of the galaxy in which she lives. She has seen a darkness, though -- some of it her sister's, and some of it darker still -- that threatens to engulf everything she loves.

She has broken with tradition and is recording her memoirs in electronic form. In this excerpt, she discusses her youth, mistakes she made, and how she began to grow into the Mother she is today.

It will be no new thing when I am criticized for submitting my life's story to this squawking, beeping bit of metal and crystal. My children -- and they are many, and I love them all -- know me for what I am. A Mother who tries, and who sometimes succeeds, and sometimes fails. They know me for a mortal.

Being mortal, I have been criticized in the past for my decisions, for not working harder to unify the Tarasin, for not fighting harder against the incursions of the offworlders, for fighting too much against the incursions of the offworlders -- I have been criticized before. When I record my life here {there is a tapping sound, slowly, of an old finger against the side of the recording mechanism} rather than trusting our oral traditions to pass down what I have learned, I can never claim to be surprised if this angers some -- or many -- of my children.

The future is so clouded, though. Darkness is everywhere. For the first time in my life, I cannot see that the Tarasin will continue to exist, and if we die out, then the wisdom of our kind will be lost to the galaxy forever. Such recordings as this, though, are timeless.

It is sad. Wisdom comes and goes. Technology lives on. And without the latter, without something made by the hands of the living, the knowledge and strength of the living cannot endure. Not as they used to.

I am hopeful that a question in your mind is, "Why, Mother, do you believe your wisdom and your life are so important, where the wisdom and lives of others were not?"

The answer is, I do not. I record my own life now, but as I speak, I will record other stories, pieces of legend, parts of the history of the Tarasin that deserve to be included in this device. When I finish speaking of my own life, I will speak of the lives of others, some who were Mothers of one irstat or another, some who never aspired to be more than hunters or warriors or wives or husbands. I will speak of those who were lost to us, and those who we found, not born to the Tarasin way, with no kampo [ed: this is the Tarasin head-fan, for which no name was previously provided] or sa'tosin [ed: these are the quills that grow from the backs of the Tarasin forearms; again, this is the first recording of the name given them by the Tarasin], but who nonetheless understand the heart of the Tarasin people. Our heart is Cularin, and long may she spin through the stars, and long may she gaze up at her twin suns, and long may her forests be warm and lush and support the life of the world.

My life . . . I do not view my life as something special. Those who operate this device seem to think otherwise, but I know the truth. I have lived as best I could, and when I die, it will be with no regrets, except that, perhaps, had things been different, I might have had one more day to attempt to do good.

Many things have been said of me. There are always rumors of how one in power came to be in power. Perhaps I will speak of these things. Perhaps not. It does depend, I suppose, on where the story takes me.

When I was young, I looked at the females of our irstat and saw them to be strong and proud. They led the Hiironi with wisdom and compassion, and the males looked to them for guidance. I wanted to grow to become one of those females. I sometimes fantasized about being Mother, but it would never be so

simple as wishing, and having it suddenly be so.

One does not become Mother, after all, because it is what one wants. I recall a talk I had with my own mother, the one who birthed me, when I was perhaps ten years of age.

"Mother," I said, "when I grow up I want to lead the irstat."

She shook her head. "No, Dariana. If that is what you want, it will never be."

I looked at her in puzzlement, and she smiled. She had a kind smile, and kinder eyes, and I knew that she had not meant to hurt me. Still, I recall the feeling of emptiness as my mother seemed to rip the dream from my grasp.

"You become the Mother of the Hiironi because it is what the irstat wants. What you want is not important. What is best for you is not in your hands to decide. You are part of something much greater. We are Tarasin. We, of all the species who have come to Cularin, have survived in these jungles. Do you know why?"

"Because we are smarter than the others," I told her. She did not like this answer.

"We are not smarter. We are not wiser, we are not stronger. We have survived here because we are right for this place. We did not choose Cularin. Cularin chose us. Just so, you cannot choose to be a leader of the irstat. The irstat chooses you."

I do not actually know how long it took me to understand her words. It was not quick, I am sure. I did not put aside my dreaming. How does one stop dreaming of one's heart's desire? But I did stop speaking of it, and in time, I found myself doing what must be done because it was the right thing to do, and not because I had any desire to become something greater than myself.

That was one of the lessons I needed to learn. One should never strive to be greater than one's self, because the self is inherently the greatest thing in the universe. We exist as potential -- I have heard Jedi speak of us as "luminous beings," creatures that transcend the frail and imperfect bodies we inhabit -- but many of us never see this. Many of us do not believe that we are more than what we see, more than the flesh we feel, more than the blood we bleed. This is only one way that our essence, that which ties us to the Force, may

manifest.

It began in dreams, in which I saw myself among the stars, and instead of feeling alone, I felt as though I were a part of each of them. In the night, I would dream, and I would find the stars, and I would find a silvery strand connecting myself to one of them, or another, until one night I saw that I was at the center of an enormous web, much like a *jornisae* spider's. The web ran from my own core to every one of the stars, and from there, to other glowing essences, and then I realized with more than a little horror that I was not, after all, at the center of the web. My vision pulled back and I saw myself as one point where a handful of threads met in a web that stretched from one side of the galaxy to the other, containing all living things.

I saw the power, and I knew the potential of the Force, but I was young and foolish and lacking in self-control. Knowing the interconnectedness of all things, I reasoned that this put the life and death of every creature in the universe in the hands of every other creature in the universe. Ultimately, this is true, but it should have forced me to recall my mother's words. It did not.

I was walking one night between irstats, returning home from a visit to the Nobuuri, when I heard something moving through the underbrush. It did not make quite so much noise as one of the great kilassin, but after dusk, even a pack of mulissiki can be a danger to a young Tarasin.

Something stepped from between the trees before me, blocking my path. It was a kilassin, but a young one, probably not quite a year. Still, it eyed me hungrily, and I knew that it would eat me if given the chance.

I could not outrun the kilassin, and no trees suitable for climbing were nearby, and I had no weapon other than a short spear that I carried as a walking stick. I have never been much with weapons, though.

I looked at the kilassin and saw the hunger in its eyes, and I raised my hand and thought of the web of which I was a part, drawing power from it to kill this creature before it killed me. Then I closed my fingers.

The sensation sickens me, even as a memory. I felt my fingers close around something soft, but tough. I saw the kilassin's eyes widen, and then I squeezed, and it shrieked, and then it fell over, dead. I had killed it. There was no blood on my hands, but I had never felt so unclean.

My mother had spoken truly. I was not wiser than that creature, nor smarter, nor stronger. By rights, I should have died that day. I did not. I drew upon something dark, something wrong, to keep myself alive. That was not my decision, though. It should never have been my decision. The lives and deaths of other creatures are linked to us, but not in a way that we may control. Every death of another creature is a death in the Force, which affects us all. Every birth, every life that is well-lived, strengthens us all.

For now, I grow tired. Perhaps I will speak more of this later. But this -- this is enough speech, for one day.

Cularin's Militia: Exposed!

Hello, friends. Yara Grugara here, reporting from the Cularin Central Broadcasting's transit service. We're currently en route to Genarius, where we're going to be looking for some answers.

Now, I'm sure some of you are still flinching from that tense day last year, when it was reported that the Thaereian Navy had been amassing troops within Cularin. I've been told that Cularin Central Broadcasting is extremely sorry for the hasty nature of the feed. I've been *told*. I've also been told that there was never any evidence of capitol ships hidden within the clouds of Genarius. Right -- that's what I've been told. So, it's up to Yara Grugara to go out, as ever, and find the truth!

I know what you're saying. "Yara, you don't need to put your beautiful self at risk like this! Yara, what are you thinking?"

Well, I'll tell you what I'm thinking. I'm thinking that someone needs to be asking the tough questions, and Yara Grugara is just the woman to do it. Were my producers happy about it? No way! They wanted Yara doing fashion and society pieces!

So, what's the truth? What did Thaere do?

Yara doesn't know. Yara *will* find out, though.

Being a good reporter means following every angle on the story, and friends, there's another angle here. Certain reports have come in that say that the

source of all the rumors about the Thaereians was none other than our white-with-green-trim locals, the Cularin Militia. Could they be starting a disinformation campaign to get Thaere expelled from the system?

We're going to be asking these, and other difficult questions, today. Right here on "Eye on Cularin!"

An approach shot of a cloud city. Fighters zip back and forth across the face of the city, and a flight of fighters engages in maneuvers in the background, a transport at the center of the formation. The camera pans to one side and we see that the ship it is in is being paced by a pair of fighters bearing the insignia of the Cularin Militia. We hear a comlink crackle, and a deep voice speaks. "Cularin Newsnet shuttle, please return to the nearest civilian city. You have entered restricted airspace." The camera then pans to Yara.

Well, friends, there you have it. Yara is yet again going somewhere that Yara is not wanted. Imagine! But we're not here to be told, "Go away!" We're here for answers.

Yara has ordered the pilot to take us in. We'll be landing on one of the platforms of the training city shortly, and then we'll see what the Militia has to say for itself.

The comlink again crackles, but before the person on the other end can begin to speak, Yara turns and hits a button on the control panel.

Attention, Cularin Militia! This is Yara Grugara, of "Eye on Cularin," and I am here to speak with your commanding officer regarding the state of affairs in our system. It's only fair to warn you that our cameras are live, so any action you take against this *unarmed civilian vessel* will be seen by the entire system.

Yara turns and grins triumphantly at the camera, then winks. The comlink crackles, and we hear the person on the other end of the connection sigh. "Cularin Newsnet shuttle, please establish holding pattern 50 kilometers out from the city while authorization is requested for your landing." Yara's grin broadens, and she clicks off the comlink, then presses another button on the console.

Pilot? Yes, you heard that right. Go ahead and take us in. Oh, just park anywhere. I'm sure they'll come and find us . . .

The cameras shut off, and when they come on again, Yara is standing at the head of the landing ramp, microphone in hand, trying to exit the ship. A half-dozen Wookiees wearing white-and-green sashes block her descent. Yara is beginning to turn various shades of red.

Yara Grugara is here as a member of the press, on a legitimate assignment to determine what is going on with your organization! You need to step aside and let me pass!

Off-camera, someone says, "Yara, you're live." She turns, still glaring, and her face softens (if only a little) when she sees the camera.

Well, friends, I suppose we can see now a little more of how the Militia comports itself, can't we? Sending a bunch of Wookiees to stop a poor, defenseless member of the press from disembarking her own ship in an attempt to interview someone about the Militia's involvement with various tawdry and sordid activities. What, oh what, do we conclude? Is someone using the Militia as a cover to ship some horrible contraband into the system? Perhaps running drugs? Is it nothing more than a front for that strange, twitchy-eyed Nirama? And how long before one of these brutes takes the holorecorder from poor Be'Seario and breaks it? Remember, if it happens, Yara told you it would!

She continues to prattle for several seconds as a small, spherical droid flies up the ramp between the Wookiees and comes to rest, hovering about a foot behind her head. She seems to notice something is amiss and turns to her left, but as she does, the droid jogs behind her right shoulder. When she turns to her right, the droid quickly moves to her left shoulder. She returns her attention to the camera and the droid comes from behind her, directly up and over her head, and then drops down to place itself between Yara and the camera.

You little monster, you're in my shot!

The screen goes black, and in a few seconds, we hear a voice-over from Yara. "Through persistence and dedication, Yara finally secured an interview with Broof Yurdel, commander of the ground divisions for the Militia. The interview took place at what we'll call an 'undisclosed location,' since they flew me there with my crew, but didn't really tell us where we were going. This reporter has some speculations. Broof is a Gungan of few words." We then see Yara and Broof, a dark-complected Gungan, sitting in a pair of chairs.

Yara: So, let's cut right to the chase, shall we? Commander Yurdel -- may I call you Broof?

Broof: Okay.

Yara: Broof, what can you tell me about the Cularin Militia's role in the recent scares relating to the Thaereian presence in the system?

Broof: Wesa protectin' Cularin from da bombad Navy of Daere.

Yara: You mean Thaere?

Broof: Dat's what meesa said. Daere.

Yara: Right. So you're protecting Cularin from the Thaereian Navy.

Broof: Yup. Da bombad navy always bein' where dey not supposed to bein'. Wesa watchin' deysa every move. Deysa tinkin' wesa dumb. Wesa not dumb. Deysa makin' da bombad big mistake, if deysa underestimate Cularin.

Yara: But let's be frank, shall we? Broof, it was reported that there were capitol ships hidden in Genarius. We've not seen any evidence of that. In fact, there are a lot more of *your* ships in and around Genarius than almost anyone else's right now. Isn't that true?

Broof: Deysa movin' da big ships when yousa makin' lots of noise about it. If yousa hadda been quiet, wesa goin' into da clouds and bombad takin' dose ships from da navy.

Yara: So you're pirates, then?

Broof: Wesa defending Cularin! When yousa bein' attacked, yousa fight back or die. Dat's war.

Yara: But we're not at war.

Broof looks at her incredulously.

Broof: Yousa not been watching da Coruscant newsfeeds? Bombad big war happenin'!

Yara: But not in Cularin. So far, all we've got is one report that there might be problems coming from Thaere. The Separatist armies have kept well away from us, in part because of our . . . allies from Thaere.

Her face twists into a grimace as she says the last half-dozen words. If one didn't know better, one might think that she found them distasteful.

Broof: Mesa seen yousa news. Yousa not likin' Daere. Yousa knowin', deysa bombad. Yousa just sayin' what da newsnet wants yousa sayin'.

Yara looks straight at the camera. She licks her lips. She forces a smile. When she speaks, it is in a pained deadpan, and the words sound very rehearsed.

Yara: Of course not. Yara Grugara would never serve as a mouthpiece for something she did not believe in, just to further her own career. Really. There is no pressure on me to speak anything other than . . . the truth.

She sighs.

Yara: So, the official position of the Cularin Militia is that they did not fabricate any evidence relating to the presence of Thaere in the system?

Broof: Yup.

Yara: And you exist for the protection of Cularin, and will do whatever is necessary to ensure that it remains safe?

Broof: Yup.

Yara: And if Thaere attempts an act of aggression, or goes beyond the prescribed limits of its mandate from the Senate, you will attempt to stop them, using force as necessary?

Broof: Yup.

Yara: Good. And here's how concerned citizens can donate to the Militia.

A series of account codes plays across the bottom of the screen.

Broof: Um . . . wesa not askin' dat.

Yara: I know. Now, two more questions. First, looking at the members of the Militia, I notice some glaring absences. One is Nim'Ri, one of the leaders of the resistance movement against the Cartel. Given that he recently resigned his post with House Hirskaala, one might expect him to be involved in the Militia. I've not seen any indication that he is. Why might that be?

Broof: Yousa be havin' to ask hissen own self. Mesa not knowin' why anyone doin' what deysa do.

Yara: If I could find him, I might. I don't suppose you know where he is. There are disturbing rumors about him.

Broof: Mesa not seein' him. Too long. Nim'Ri -- hissen a good being, lots of lovin' for Cularin. Dat's two questions.

Yara: Actually, no --

Broof: Yousa been most kind, but mesa gots to go now. Important meeting. Yousa have good luck findin' out what da bombad navy's doin'. Wesa doin' da same.

Then he rises, shakes hands with Yara, and leaves.

Friendship in the Order

As war rages across the galaxy, the Jedi have been pulled in many directions at once. Some, feeling the disquiet that runs through the order, have taken it upon themselves to collect the knowledge and philosophy of certain Jedi to record for future generations. In addition to interviewing remaining members of the Council, much of the compiling, editing, and refining of information is being done on Almas, well away from the struggles at the galactic center. The faculty of the Academy has been involved in many ways, as have the Padawans, in the gathering and sharing of information.

Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk has been interviewed for this project on a number of occasions. While his views are often controversial, he remains a respected member of the Jedi Order. This transcription contains elements of his thoughts on a topic many Jedi find oddly confusing - friendship.

A hologram of Master Lanius appears. He has his hands folded beneath his

chin, elbows propped up on his desk. He stares off into the distance in what might be a Force trance. Slowly, his eyes come back into focus, and he looks toward the viewer. A voice -- not his -- speaks.

Questioner: Hello, Master Lanius. Thank you for seeing us.

Master Lanius: It's my honor. Thank you for asking me to contribute.

Q: Your reputation is such that even had circumstances not dictated that we come to Almas, we would have spoken with you. We are simply sorry about the . . . timing of this particular conversation.

[Lanius nods, and for a moment a frown tugs at his mouth.]

ML: These are difficult times for everyone. If anything, that makes it more necessary for us to record what we know, as well as what we feel.

Q: You are quite renowned as an advocate of the living Force, are you not? The idea that we should trust our intuition is not always a popular one.

ML: It does depend on who you ask, I suppose. But, yes, I suppose that I do sometimes espouse some atypical views. [He smiles.] If my atypicality has anything to do with my being here, on this wonderful planet with all these wonderful Padawans, then I cannot help but believe that my own intuition has served me unfailingly well.

Q: Indeed. As one who strives to be in constant contact with those around you, and with the galaxy as a whole, this must put a great strain on you. How does one maintain contact without forming harmful attachments?

ML: You choose interesting words. "Harmful" attachments. That presupposes that there is such a thing as a "harmless" attachment, which I'm not sure I agree with.

Q: Please, elaborate.

ML: Gladly. The notion of attachment is one of needing something that is outside of us for completeness. But we learn, as we grow in the Force, that there is nothing of the material world that we "need," no single person without whom we could not exist, were they to leave our lives unexpectedly. [He closes his eyes for a moment and nods to himself, then reopens his eyes.] It is a challenge. For all of us. But attachments weaken our resolve to do what is best

for all living beings and cause us to think more of our individual selves.

Q: Is the individual self not important, then?

ML: It is. We are all important, because we are all part of the Force. I heard something Mother Dariana said recently that struck a chord. She told a story of her childhood and of killing another creature with the Force because she was so attached to the idea of living.

Q: But self-preservation is natural, and the will of the Force, is it not?

ML: Life and death are both the will of the Force. Sometimes, self-preservation is right. Other times, the death of one may better serve the many.

Q: Let's shift the topic a bit, back toward attachment. You know many Jedi. Do you consider any of them to be your friends?

[There is a long pause as Master Lanius considers the answer. He stares straight ahead, a half-smile on his face, as he thinks.]

ML: Every Jedi -- every Master, every Knight, and every Padawan -- is my friend. There are very few beings who embrace the light side of the Force -- or who, at the very least, abjure the dark -- who I would not call "friend." But the question you ask goes beyond that, and gets at a core issue in our approach to how we may serve the galaxy. Because if we call beings "friend," then do we not imply that we have some attachment to them, that we love them and value their lives? [He leans forward, hands clasped.] And, if this is the case, is this not a weakness that can then be exploited? Are we not failing to serve the will of the Force as best we can?

Q: They are your questions, not ours.

ML: I've spent a lot of time thinking about these things. I've spoken about them with individuals who came to me from outside the order, trying to explain the Jedi Code to them. It's very difficult to help someone who has not attempted to live the Code understand what it means. We are not emotionless creatures. We feel. Being a Jedi does not rob us of the emotions with which we were born. We are simply no longer dominated by them.

Yes. I love my friends. The Jedi are my friends. Many non-Jedi are my friends. I

love all of them equally, or as equally as a flawed being is able to do so.

Q: Yet there is no attachment, with this love?

ML: If there is, then it becomes an attachment to all living beings, to all life. The troublesome sort of attachment, which we teach our Padawans to avoid, is the attachment to one person, one thing, at the expense of any other.

Q: Even the self?

ML: There was a story I heard once, about a man who wanted to find the Force. He believed he could reach a place on a faraway planet, or maybe a moon, where he would find a swirling white cloud made of pure Force energy. He traveled the galaxy from one side to the other in search of this swirling white cloud. He left his life behind, he left his family behind, and he left his children behind. All of his friends, all of his valuables, everything that had ever meant anything to him. He traveled by freighter, doing manual labor as he hopped from one planet to the next. He would get off, ask questions, describe the cloud, and then find a new freighter. He never held onto the disappointment of his failures, but they became many. I couldn't even guess how many planets he visited, how many languages he must have spoken, how many times he must have pushed himself to go on and try just one more world, because there he might find the Force.

Q: And did he? Is there such a cloud?

ML: I don't know if the cloud exists. But I know that he never found it, and that he died old and disappointed. Do you know why he never found it?

Q: You speak as though we were Padawans.

ML: No, I speak as though you were Jedi. Why did he never find it?

Q: Because it was inside him all the time.

[Lanius cocks his head and chuckles.]

ML: Whatever the Force is, wherever it comes from, I can guarantee you that it is not a swirling white cloud inside of any single individual.

Q: But the Force is in all of us.

ML: Correct. But that's not the reason why he didn't find it.

Q: Then why?

ML: Because, for all of his leave-takings, for all the things he removed from his life, he retained one attachment, one thing that he valued above all others. Ironically, his attachment was to the Force itself, and for it, he gave up what could have been a productive life to chase a dream across a galaxy.

[He leans forward.]

Friendship in the Jedi Order is one aspect of our philosophy. We are all part of the Force. As Master Yoda says, it surrounds us and penetrates us. All of us. The friendships that we have should be the same. So, no: Friendship is not forbidden. It is part of who and what we are. We work together. At times, we may fight together. Sometimes, we even die together. But we do not die to save another Jedi. We die -- if we must -- knowing that all life is sacrosanct. We are all, every one of us, vital to the will of the Force.

The Lost

Lora Nadad is a Padawan at the Almas Academy. She came to the Jedi way relatively late in life -- she is 19 years old, and she's still working to integrate the lessons from her early life, which were often harsh, with the teachings of the Academy.

Lora lived for a long time as a watcher of "the Lost," the name given the children of Cularin who, for one reason or another, have slipped out of society's field of vision. The Lost are young people who live in the abandoned warehouses and other hovels throughout Cularin, some on the main planet, some in the floating cities of Genarius, and some in the lesser-trafficked districts of Forard, scant kilometers from the Jedi academy. As a watcher, Lora looked out for those children, along with a number of other young adults. All of the watchers rose from the ranks of the Lost themselves, and they have a vested interest in doing everything in their power to protect the displaced children of the Cularin system.

As a Padawan, Lora has begun to make headway in raising public recognition of the Lost, and she's trying to establish a fund to assist them in obtaining medical supplies -- the most pressing need this little-known subclass generally has.

One aspect of a recent lesson on the responsible use of the Force involved asking the Padawans to demonstrate how to affect the minds of others without actually calling on the Force. Lora's report, presented in holographic form, made its way into public circulation and has raised a number of eyebrows.

[A figure flickers into being. She is a young woman, dark hair pulled back into a tight braid. She wears the robes of a Padawan and a lightsaber hangs at her belt. Three small gems form a triangle on the lobe of her left ear, and a series of tiny hoop earrings runs from the top of her right ear down to her lobe. She has her hands clasped before her, and her knuckles are beginning to turn white. After several seconds, she begins to speak.]

Hi. I'm Lora, and I'm a Padawan at the Almas Academy. I'm from Cularin, and I can't remember my parents. I grew up on the streets of Forard, scavenging scraps and doing whatever it took to stay alive. If it weren't for the kindness of two strangers who became my friends, Arin and Pthillip, I might still be on the street. I'm here, though. They brought me here, and now I'm a Padawan. And I want to tell you about the children of Cularin who have no homes. They -- well, we, since I was one of them -- call themselves the Lost.

There are lots of the Lost in Cularin. I mean, for a system as small as ours, we have a lot of traffic. I know that some of my friends who watch over the children still talk about what it was like when the Hutt was in charge. Whatever gets said now, he was definitely running slaves through Cularin. When there were children who were too weak or sick to be good sales, he'd have his lackeys dump them. Or he might steal their parents to sell, and leave the children to take care of themselves.

Not all of the children are that kind of tragic thing, though. Some of them just ran away from home. The thing with the Lost is, we all ended up together, and it didn't matter why. It only mattered that we were together. We always thought we could make it just fine.

It's hard, though. See, food isn't cheap, but at least there are places where you can get it. The Lost do grow up. I mean, look at me. I'm growing up, I guess. And the people who were part of the Lost, when they get older and can do something, sometimes they do.

What makes it hard is that once you've lived alone for a while, you get proud, and you don't want people giving you handouts. Even children can get like that. The people who grew up and got jobs and everything, they remember

what it was like. So they don't do handouts, but they do make it so that you can go and do something, some work or whatever, and get food. There's not enough of that to go around, so there are gangs of kids that go out and scour the garbage for stuff that gets thrown away that's still perfectly good, and there are some who steal.

A lot of the kids who are lost have problems with the whole "right versus wrong" thing. See, they're kids, and they don't have things, and they don't understand why. It's like, people need to eat, right? And they need a place to sleep, and warm blankets. They need other people.

But lost children are just invisible. It's hard enough to get adults to really see you, when you're a kid. But a dirty kid, in raggedy clothes, who looks like she needs a handout? Forget it. So these kids may walk around all day, trying to find something to do, and nobody even looks at them. I know what that feels like, because I was there for a long time. Nobody even took the time to teach me how to use a datapad until I got here. I couldn't read or anything, because nobody cared enough to teach me. I taught myself some of how to use the Force, but even there, I was heading in a bad direction.

You know what happens to kids that no one cares about? They stop caring, too. They do whatever they need to, to stay alive. I did some pretty horrible things. I thought I had to do them, to stay alive. I don't know for sure what would have happened if I hadn't done what I did, but since I became a Padawan, I've wanted to do something to help all the lost children.

There are a few people who are already doing things. My friend Ariella, here on Almas, watches over about seventy kids. Does it surprise you that there's a hovel with seventy children in it, no adults, less than two kilometers from the Jedi Academy? It surprised a lot of people here, I'm sure. Ariella's a little younger than me, but she takes care of the kids really well. Then there's Gwen and Dani. Gwen's kind of the watcher in Gadrin, on Cularin, and Dani's the watcher in Hedrett. There are probably about four hundred kids on Cularin alone, living in all kinds of abandoned warehouses and stuff. Gwen and I have been working together a lot recently, with Pthillip and Arin and our friend Alurali -- ooh, and she just passed her trials, so congratulations! -- anyway, we're trying to do things to help the kids, so a lot of the Cularin duty has gone to Dani, but she's good that way.

If I had to guess, I'd say there's at least 1,500 to 2,000 kids without homes in Cularin at any given time. As far as I'm concerned, fifteen or twenty kids that no one noticed, that no one cared about, would be fifteen or twenty too many. Something needs to be done.

I haven't set up any kind of charity fund, and I haven't tried to establish any sort of home thing for them. There aren't any places where you can drop off food. I mean, food isn't even what they need the most, they need medical supplies, really basic stuff like antibio's and bandages. There aren't places where you can drop that off, either.

I probably could go out and do everything that needs to be done. If I had the credits, I mean. Which I really don't. This is all of our problem, though, not just mine. You don't have to give anyone any food, or money, or medical supplies -- but I want you to think about it. Actually look at people when you walk down the street. Look at them, and think about where they come from, and where they're going after they see you. Notice the children. Don't just look past them. Notice them, and then do what your heart tells you to do.

[With that, the image flickers and fades.]

Tilnes Falling

The Verga Mer Mining Company -- VMMC -- has experienced any number of problems with its holdings in the Cularin system. While they survived accidentally snubbing a Hutt and managed to stay in business even without the assistance of Nirama and his smuggling consortium, their mining operations on Tilnes have never been among the most secure. The strange electromagnetic pulses that wash over Tilnes with disturbing frequency have cost VMMC thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of credits, and the discovery of not one but two secret bases beneath the surface of Tilnes did little to make the miners, investors, or managers of VMMC more comfortable.

Somehow, VMMC has remained in business. The mines of Tilnes have long been fertile, providing one of the most consistent sources of high-grade crystals used as power foci in a number of popular blasters. With weapon production up as a result of the Clone Wars, the mines of Tilnes are at peak production -- no mean feat, since they're now a decades-old establishment in galactic trade.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle VMMC had to overcome was its re-entry to the marketplace following the strange events over Almas, which kept it from being a major player in the original equipping of the armies of either the Separatists

or the Loyalists. Still, the canny Verga Nus and Mer Stodiz managed to pull things together, make the necessary deals, and sign all the contracts to put VMMC back into the crystal business.

All is not well, though. Recently, internal memos have begun to circulate outside VMMC offices, indicating that something may not be right. The information remains very hush-hush, and for now, travels only by word of mouth. Some might wonder what else those mouths carry . . .

Memo Date: [3 weeks ago]

From: HB7

To: All Area Managers

Colleagues,

It has been noticed by me and my people that there are some things not right in the mines. The south polar regions of the mines are having trouble again. It's not those dumb worms this time. In fact, we don't see much of them right now, and we don't know why. Some of my workers have said it's too quiet down there, and when I go down, it seems really quiet to me, too. I don't know what's going on, but ever since the piggies and their blaster-happy neighbors got found by the nice kids who pulled VMMC's tail out of the fire back with those crashes and the big blackout a while ago, things have been weird.

I know that company policy says that we never knew nothing about those piggies or the Thaere people, and that's fine. We never did. None of my people, for sure. It's hard enough doing what we do without having to worry about running into some patrol of half-size, snout-face, lying freaks who smile so big you think they're gonna eat their own heads. (And I know the company policy says we're not supposed to talk ill about the piggies, but that's for public consumption, and I've got enough years here that I'm not about to apologize for speaking plain when I'm just talking to my peers.) Don't even get me started on how worried I was about my workers going down into the tunnels, knowing those half-baked freaks from Thaere might be wandering around, waiting to shoot someone. I don't need to remind you how freaked out our people were when the two head honchos from the Jedi Academy showed up because of all the problems, and our own security people weren't doing much more than sitting around and looking cute. I still want to see the report from security on why we didn't know what was going on down there, but I guess that's just something I should file a different memo for. I don't know.

Sometimes, I just wonder.

I was there when we saw the piggies off and back into their ships, so I guess they're orbiting somewhere, trying to keep away from all the other locals who want to put holes in them. They've got to be some kind of warped, to stay around here with the way some people want to kill them. It's like they jumped hyperspace and their brains didn't come along. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'd really like to see a report on what they were doing down in that secret base of theirs, too. They blasted it on their way out so that no one else would end up using it, and what's down there is just rubble and debris and junk. But we're miners. We can send folks in to check that out and clear it. It may be getting in the way of us doing our jobs. I don't want that, you don't want that, and we all know it. I hear the response already. "We are not going to invest resources . . . must maintain market share . . . based on productivity reports . . ."

With all due respect, I say that if management don't care what the piggies and the Thaereians were doing, they can invest some resources in blowing their productivity reports out their market share. It makes no sense to me, or anyone else I talk to, to think that they spent all that time down there and didn't make any kind of extraction from our mines.

Now here's the other thing that's bothering me. Some of our operations are getting way too close to the Smile. This place is nothing but bad, and I don't care if we've got survey teams that are saying there are huge deposits of high-grade crystals down there. We've got no way to get them out. None. Zilch. Zero. We get too close to the Smile and all our machines start shutting down, and the people we've sent that way on foot aren't coming back looking too good. I have a couple down really sick right now with some bizarre mine-fever. I know that VMMC's been on Tilnes a long time, and maybe we think we know better than those old legends about Kaernor, but the thing you learn in any place that you've been long enough is that old legends become old legends because they've got a kernel of truth. If we go too close to the Smile, if we start digging in a place where we shouldn't be digging, we're risking more than just profits and market shares and resources. We're risking lives. That's not good for me, and I hope it's not good for you.

The fact that the piggies and the Thaereians were so close to the Smile really sits badly for me. I mean, it makes a lot of sense that they'd use that area as a cover, but it also tells me that they didn't care, and when you flaunt not caring

around things like that, they come back to bite you. I don't know that those Thaereians care about anything except themselves, and that's their business. I still say that the team that disappeared a month before the Thaereians were discovered probably wandered on a patrol, but I've read the "official enquiry" reports just like everyone else has and know that Thaere denied everything. I don't know what anyone expected them to say. They shot at the kids who helped us out, chased them and tried to kill them.

About the only decent things to come out of Thaere are the things that came out of Thaere, the people who defected. I hear some of them are all right, and one of them's doing good work on a militia. (Exactly who got the kickbacks for putting them in our backyard, by the way? Not that I care, at this point, since at least we know they're here and what they're up to. Besides, they spend more time repairing droids than anything else.)

I just think there are too many secrets right now. Management isn't talking to us. We're not involved in the decisions. Not that we ever have been, really, but still - there's a lot going on in Cularin. I'm thinking that we're part of this system, and just because we're a business doesn't mean we should sit around and do nothing when everyone else is doing something. It also doesn't mean that the something we do ought to be something everyone sees, but it ought to be something. If that makes sense.

We need to think about our place in this system. Better or worse, we're here, and better or worse, we've got contributions we can make.

Felanil Baaks, Jedi Artisan

Felanil Baaks was born to be a Jedi. From his early life in the Duro system to his training on Coruscant to his work in refining the creation of lightsabers, he has demonstrated quite aptly that there are as many ways to be a Jedi as there are Jedi in the galaxy. Now, with war threatening to shatter the Republic, Baaks has come to Cularin. The lessons he has to teach are less useful on Coruscant, where much of the daily activity of Jedi centers around the defense of the Republic.

For all of his training, Baaks is not truly a warrior, nor is he a diplomat. If forced to describe himself, the first words he might use (after "Jedi," of course) would probably be "artist" and "teacher." The medium of his art is the lightsaber -- not its use so much as its design and construction. Felanil Baaks is a Jedi

artisan, one of a handful in the galaxy, and he has come to Cularin in search of what he believes may be his last class of pupils. The following are his own words, delivered in an introductory lecture on Almas.

Greetings, Padawans. Greetings, Knights. Greetings, Masters Lanius and Devan. I am called Felanil Baaks. I am a crafter of lightsabers.

I am not one for speaking much about myself. In fact, I find myself to be one of the most uninteresting topics possible! Yet Master Lanius has asked me to speak of who I am, where I come from, why I am here, and what I have to offer you in this time of great strife throughout the galaxy. I am much beholden to him for allowing me to come to your wonderful academy and pass on what meager knowledge I have gained in my time as part of the Jedi Order. So, I will speak, but I will endeavor to make this brief. Those of you who work with me will find out that I do not speak much. I am going to talk more about that shortly.

I have told you who I am in name and in craft. To be more precise, I am what you might call a Jedi artisan. I have long sought to understand the nature of the Force. We are all taught that the Force is an energy field created by all living things. When we examine the lightsaber, then -- a weapon, a tool, an inanimate object in which the Force resides -- we find ourselves faced with a quandary. How do we understand this manifestation of the Force? Certainly, the Force binds all things together in the galaxy, be they organic or inorganic. But a lightsaber is something more. It is an object, an inorganic thing, into which we channel our essence, our essential connection to the Force. If there were a tie between that canister, those switches, those crystals, and the Force before, it was so small as to be almost negligible. When we are done, though, we have created an object of matchless beauty and elegance, capable of taking lives and of protecting them.

Thoughts like these led me to explore the creation of lightsabers in more detail than many of us choose. For most Jedi, the creation of the lightsaber is a rite of passage, a signal that they are ready to cease being Padawans and instead become the protectors of the galaxy that we all strive to be, in our own way. For some of us, the creation of that first lightsaber is only the beginning. When I completed my first lightsaber -- it hangs at my hip now, though it has changed much, and not at all, since I first imbued the crystals inside with the Force -- I looked at it and saw that it could be better. I saw that the connection created between myself and the lightsaber was an imperfect representation of my own

connection to the Force. This made me wish to know more, to understand more. I stand here now because of those desires, and because of the incumbent responsibility to share what I have learned.

That is who I am and what I am. As to where I come from, I was born in the Duro system. Specifics have never been important to me, as I was given to the Jedi at an early age by my family. They recognized that my gifts would allow me to contribute to the galaxy in a way that did not involve hyperdrives or the Kessel Run. I consider my childhood to have begun on Coruscant, where I received lightsaber training from Master Yoda, among others.

I would describe myself as having been an average pupil. I did not excel at the combat forms. Master Yoda once joked that I was a master of Form Zero -- of wielding the lightsaber without igniting it. Please, feel free to laugh, because there was some small laughter when the Master said this. But you must remember -- he told us all this, and I tell it to you now -- that Form Zero is the truest form of wielding a lightsaber. If you cannot wield a lightsaber without igniting it, then you should consider whether you are worthy to wield it at all. I do not doubt that there are many present -- some Padawans included -- who could easily best me, were we to spar with lightsabers. Being able to defeat another being is insignificant, though, unless you can understand that being, and accept that if the situation were different, he might be as completely justified in killing you as you feel in killing him. You must understand when to ignite and when to ignore. That is Form Zero.

Where I come from, then, is from the Jedi. I believe in what we do. It is right to protect those who cannot protect themselves. I am proud to be a Jedi. I am proud to train other Jedi.

I am here, on Cularin, to convey and record what I know of the creation of lightsabers. I will take pupils while I am here -- perhaps some of you. But I will not take a Padawan. I have never taken a Padawan, and I will never do so. I will offer what you might consider to be advanced training in the art and craft of lightsaber design and construction. Only those who have already crafted their own lightsabers need express interest. If you have not demonstrated at least this much facility with the act of creation, then you are not ready for more advanced lessons.

I have been told that a lightsaber I crafted some time ago has made its way to Almas, a gift from Master Windu to one of you. If it is the lightsaber I recall, I

was pleased with the work, and I am glad to know that it is in hands that will use it wisely. That is the nature of what I do: I create, and then I release. If you are to work with me, you also must recognize that this is the nature of creation. We do not hold tight to the things that we bring into the world. Just as my parents did not hold tight to me when they knew I had a destiny other than what they might have wrought, and just as I myself have not held tight to a dozen or more fine quality lightsabers I created with casings of crystal or wood or stone - or, the one that presented the greatest engineering challenge, a liquid matrix suspended in a compressed gravity tube - so, too, will you see that the products of your creative acts often are not "yours."

The creation is a product of the Force. It will always be at the whim of the Force to dispose of that which it assists in creating.

Jedi Artisan Prestige Class

The coming of Felanil Baaks to Almas has opened a new opportunity for students at the academy. Or, more accurately, for former students. Baaks has agreed to take on five individuals who wish to become Jedi artisans, to master the crafting of lightsabers. His trainees will not be drawn from the ranks of the Padawans, however, but instead from those who have already graduated and become Jedi Knights. Only a handful of Jedi artisans exist in the galaxy; that Baaks has agreed to train five more, in his time on Almas, is most remarkable.

While most Jedi choose the path of the warrior or the diplomat, others elect to follow less daring roads that keep them out of the public eye while allowing them to further explore the relationship between living creatures and the Force. One path, which remains relatively unexplored, is that of the Jedi artisan.

Jedi artisans seek to understand creativity as a central aspect of the will of the Force. Most regard the construction of their personal lightsabers as their primary creative activity during their early years in the Jedi Order. As such, the standard Jedi artisan is presented as a master lightsaber craftsperson, though the specifics of the Jedi artisan's training may dictate that another craft is more appropriate. Whatever the artisan crafts, it must be an object that will ultimately be imbued with the Force.

The act of creation is central to the artisan, since it represents a union of the creator and the created. Perhaps more importantly, though, it represents a

means by which the Force can be brought to something inert, something in which the Force did not exist prior to the artisan's intervention.

An artisan might create a half-dozen truly exceptional works in a lifetime. Some of these will be given to other Jedi (with the approval of the Jedi Council) and some will become part of the Jedi archives. Generally, the artisan keeps one for herself.

Something to Mull Over

I saw them first as we entered the upper atmosphere of Genarius. I thought that they were a distant radiation storm of some kind and almost steered away, but something caught my eye. The colors -- they were all wrong for a radiation storm. The clouds themselves, a swirling mix of orange and blue, seemed to spark with pink and violet, though the "sparks," as I first named them, were much too smooth. It was like watching electricity move in a perfect arc between two poles, a curve so gentle and subtle that, from a distance, it was easy to see it as a spark. But the flashes of color, splashes of intensity amidst the clouds, came toward me. That was the first time I saw a mull of cochlera.

Generally, there are between thirty and fifty of these things in a mull. They glide through the clouds, taking in the gases, processing them, and blinking pink and violet and white. If you've never seen them, it's almost impossible to describe, but I suppose I'll do what I can.

Up close, they're actually fairly disgusting. In a beautiful way, I guess. Their upper bodies are clear globular sacs, filled with a roiling fluid where the brilliant energy arcs back and forth. Their flesh -- such as it is -- seems pliable, and their bodies change shape as the currents in the clouds shift, twisting the creatures in impossible directions. Each of the cochlera has a half-dozen long appendages, each between three and twenty meters in length, though oddly enough, the size of the bodies doesn't vary markedly, only the length of the appendages. I'm not sure I'd call them tentacles, since that always implied (to me, at least) that they might be used for something. I've never seen a cochlera use those droopy limbs, so I've come to think of them as pseudopods, and if some xenobiologist wants to come out and take a look and tell the universe what they really are, well, that's fine.

It's a lot like watching a floating sack of goo with six long, gooey trails behind it. But the way the skin shifts makes it look like the gases are sliding over it and

reacting with something on the inside -- which I suppose they probably are -- and the movement of the pseudopods is almost hypnotic. Those moments when something inside them shifts and you get the arcs of color are worth watching, and when you're watching them for what's going on inside, instead of paying attention to what they look like on the surface, it's hard to look away.

If you're ever in Cularin, these creatures are a sight. I've never come across anything like them in the galaxy. JB says, check them out.

-- from the travel log of Jaan Bluum

The cochlera are a species of creature found only in the clouds of Genarius. They float on the currents present in the gases, traveling in loose associations referred to as "mulls." There is some speculation as to the relationship among the creatures that make up a mull of cochlera, but their physiology makes discussions of families -- as we know them -- somewhat difficult.

Cochlera reproduce by splitting themselves into two identical pieces. While speculation remains rampant as to what triggers the splitting of one creature into two, a number of conditions must exist for the fissioning to occur. First, the cochlera must be near a pocket of heavy beskium. Given that this is not one of the gases the creatures use for their nourishment, it is unclear *why* this gas is necessary, but there has never been a reported case of cochlera reproduction in the absence of the beskium.

Further, there must be other cochlera nearby. The fissioning is never done in isolation from a mull, and in fact, a cochlera that comes in contact with heavy beskium without at least a half-dozen others of its species nearby will simply swell up, becoming larger and larger until it eventually bursts. This has led some xenobiologists to speculate that the cochlera may actually release chemicals into the atmosphere of Genarius that enable others to split and create more of their kind. If so, this means that the creatures are not as amoebic as may first be perceived, at least as regards their reproductive activity. Unfortunately, researchers have never been able to get close enough to fissioning cochlera to obtain atmospheric samples that might help them determine what (if anything) may have been released by the remainder of the mull as a creature divided itself to create new life.

A final condition that must be met in order for the cochlera to reproduce is that Genarius itself must be experiencing fierce storms near its core. While this is not altogether uncommon, there are lulls, times when the storms become

much less intense. During those times, the mortality rate among the cochlera increases dramatically. If the creatures cannot split, they eventually swell to the point where the gas inside their bodies literally tears them apart.

Because of the location of Cularin, and because of the lack of attention to the cochlera, more specifics of the reproductive capacities of the creatures are not available. They are indeed a beautiful addition to the cloudscape of Genarius, and they remain a mystery.

Stories of Caarimon

Welcome to "Eye on Cularin." Yara Grugara is on assignment; I'm Melanda Forswoth.

Our top story: Who is the Metatheran Cartel? They've been in Cularin for several years, and yet we know almost nothing about them. What do they eat? What do they drink? Do they read the right holonets? Do they wear the right clothes? Our viewers deserve to know the truth about these individuals, what they do in their spare time, and what kinds of color schemes work well with their strange, piggish skintones. So, we'll start with what we know.

They come from somewhere called Caarimon, but no one goes there except for the Caarites themselves, and sometimes, the Filordi. Why the secrecy? What, oh what, could they be hiding? They're traders, not warriors, so that must mean that they have some sort of secret... well, some sort of secret *something* that they don't want anyone to know about.

To learn the facts, we went to the place where the facts live -- the streets of Cularin, in the hopes of discovering the truth about Caarimon.

Fade to the streets of Gadrin. Melanda stands, microphone in hand, beside the street. A pale, blue-skinned Twi'lek notices her and starts to walk in the opposite direction, but she hurries after him.

Melanda: Sir? Sir, could you please wait a moment? Sir, if I could ask your name?

The Twi'lek, clearly irritated, turns.

Twi'lek: You may call me Jaiteh.

Melanda: Well, Jaiteh, I'd like to -- I mean, hello. I'm Melanda Forswoth, from "Eye on Cularin."

Jaiteh: Isn't that Yara Grugara's show?

Melanda: Yara is on assignment. I'm filling in for her.

Jaiteh: You're almost as perky as she is. But not quite.

His lekku twitch, and his tone of voice makes it clear that this was not intended as a compliment.

Melanda: Thank you! I try. Now, can I ask you some questions?

Jaiteh*[sighing]*: Certainly.

Melanda: I'm conducting a series of interviews with people about Caarimon. You may not know that Caarimon is the world the Caarites -- they're the Metatheran Cartel -- come from.

Jaiteh: I seem to remember knowing that, yes. But I've never been to Caarimon, so I don't think I'd be much help to you. I'll just be on my way.

Melanda catches him by his arm, barely missing grabbing a lekku, and smiles almost as broadly as Yara might. It's clear the young woman has been studying tapes of the normal host.

Melanda: No, please. I don't think anyone on Cularin has been to Caarimon. I just wanted to get your perceptions of it. What have you heard? What do you think you know?

Jaiteh: Those are very different things. What have I heard? I've heard that it's a small world, as befits a small people. I've heard that it has heavy gravity, and that precious metals are mined in shafts that stretch all the way through the planet.

Melanda: Um . . . wouldn't that create uncontrollable tectonic activity that might destabilize the entire planet and send it exploding in millions of chunks out into space?

Jaiteh: No.

Melanda: Oh. Okay.

Jaiteh: I've also heard that much of the world is forested, and that it has no spaceports. That the Caarites are actually a slave race working for the Hutt overlords who live beneath the planet's surface. I've heard that they don't drink anything fermented, ferment anything grown, or grow anything drunk or fermented. I've heard that on Caarimon, Caarites are immune to blaster fire and natural and artificial poisons, and that their skin becomes as hard as stone without losing any flexibility.

Melanda: That would make them virtually indestructible! Why would they ever leave home?

Jaiteh: They wouldn't. Which tells me that most or all of what I've heard is not true. That leads me to your second question -- what do I think I know? I don't think I know anything. I tried doing business with them once, and I never got any closer to Caarimon than an account they siphon their funds through on Coruscant. They can keep their planet, for all I care.

Melanda: So, you don't know anything about the planet?

Jaiteh walks away. We fade to another street, more crowded. Again, Melanda stands just outside a throng of people, but rather than waiting, she wades into the middle of them. All of them but four - three Rodian females and a Wookiee male - leave when they see the camera.

Melanda: Hello. I'm Melanda Forswoth, from "Eye on Cularin."

Rodian Female 1: Isn't that Yara's show?

Rodian Female 2: Where's Yara?

Rodian Female 3: Didn't you used to do the weather on one of the holonets?

Melanda's face pales a little, and she forces a smile.

Melanda: Yara is on assignment, and I'm filling in. We're talking to people on the street today --

Rodian Female 2: We're on the sidewalk, not the street. It's not safe to stand in the street.

Rodian Female 1: Oh, I'd say not! Did you hear that there was another speeder accident, just this morning?

Rodian Female 2: Is that what you're here about, Belinda?

Melanda: It's Melanda, actually.

Rodian Female 2: What's Melanda? If you want to ask me questions about some "Melanda," you're going to be disappointed. I've never heard the word before. Is it Dosh? You don't want to speak Dosh around Nerrowr here.

Nerrowr: Grunt. Grunt.

Melanda looks off-camera.

Melanda: Could someone get the translator working? All I got from the walking stench was two grunts.

Voice from off-camera: It's working, Mel.

Melanda turns pale and looks at the Wookiee, who shakes his head.

Nerrowr: I sometimes say "grunt" just in case the idiot who's talking to me is relying on a simple-minded translator. It can be very informative.

Melanda: Right. Do any of you know anything about Caarimon? No? All right, then, time to move on!

Fade in on Melanda standing in front of one of the brightly lit casinos of Tolea Biqua. She smiles too broadly, giving her an almost-Caarite appearance. Rough-looking types shove their way past her, entering and leaving the casino. She makes as if to grab one - a very tall humanoid with pale blue skin and an angry cast to his features - then, at the last moment, thinks better of it and taps him on the arm.

Melanda: Hello? I'm Melanda Forswoth, from "Eye on Cularin."

She waits for the obligatory question about Yara. Instead, the being looks her over appraisingly, glances at the camera, and smiles. His teeth appear to be sharpened.

Falsswon: Hello, Melanda Forswoth. What can Falsswon do for you, this day?

Melanda: Yara is on assignment -- oh. Sorry. I'm doing person-on-the-street interviews about Caarimon. Could you -- I mean, would you talk to me for a few minutes?

Falsswon: The homeworld of the Caarites? I could be . . . persuaded.

Melanda smiles her winningest smile, and he smiles back. Her straight white teeth make a disturbing contest with his sharpened teeth, all of which appear to be black near their roots.

Melanda: What do you know of the world of the Caarites?

Falsswon: Bleak. Large, too large for the small things that live there. Gave them an overdeveloped sense of presence in the galaxy. Or absence. Small on a large, empty world means one must develop ways to make oneself feel larger.

Melanda: But what about their culture?

Falsswon: Culture? The Caarites have no culture of their own. They take the cultures of others. They follow whatever trends will make them appear most a part of the galaxy, and not separate from it.

Melanda: Sounds reasonable.

Falsswon: If you are vapid and galactically inconsequential, certainly. The Caarites are dangerous because the only way to predict their activities is to watch what everyone else in the galaxy does, and then wonder what little change they will make to it. See how they followed the model of the Trade Federation, but have yet to get their charter revoked? It is because they know how to work with local politicians, rather than against them. They also chose their allies more . . . wisely.

Melanda: Right. But this isn't a political show. We're here to talk about their culture. You know, entertainment, fashion --

Falsswon: And I told you, no such beast exists! You are a blithering dribble who has been let wander too far from her society page, Melanda Forswoth.

Melanda's mouth drops open, and she looks as though she might say

something. Then Falsswon pulls a blaster, turns, and points it directly at the camera. We see a flash of light, then black.

Fade to Cularin Central Broadcasting's news floor. Yara Grugara sits behind the news desk, hands folded in front of her. She looks intense -- more intense than we've seen her since the Genarius scare last year.

That, my friends, is the last time Melanda Forswoth was seen. Yara spoke with CCB management at great length about whether to air the final clip, but if any of you can help us find this Falsswon -- "False One," how original, I wonder what his real name is? -- or if you have information about sweet young Melanda, please contact us.

This is Yara Grugara, for "Eye on Cularin," signing off.

Long Live the Republic

Lady Senator Lavina Wren's Address to an Audience on Cularin

The business of being a Senator in the Republic -- never a simple task -- became much more complicated when the direction of debates on the Senate floor made it clear that discontent with the Republic was growing. With the vote of no confidence in Supreme Chancellor Valorum and the inability of the Senate to adequately censure the Trade Federation, one of the worst jobs in the galaxy was that of a junior Senator. The worst of all was that of a junior Senator without a system.

Following the disappearance of Cularin, Senator Wren remained in the Senate as much out of pity as out of respect. While she was well regarded, she was also young (at least in matters political) and knew that she had much to prove. Hers became a strong voice among what would come to be known as the Loyalists, those who believed in the Republic and its ideals, and in spite of her lack of a constituency, she argued with such passion that many among the Senators forgot that she was representing a system that, for a time, included only herself and a few thousand expatriates. At least, those who agreed with her forgot.

The battle to continue to represent Cularin was only one that Wren managed to win because of the continued commitment of the Jedi to discovering what had happened in Cularin, and their belief that Cularin was not, in fact, lost. The disturbance in the Force was not what you would expect if ten million people

had died; if anything, they said, the disturbance was more akin to ten million people suddenly going into hyperspace, but not emerging. Even with the support of the Jedi, though, it's unlikely that Wren would have maintained her position in the Senate for more than another six months after Cularin's re-emergence, had nothing happened.

She has returned to Cularin a number of times since its recovery, but until now has only made "unofficial" visits. This is a transcript and account of her first "official" visit to Cularin since its return, and provides a number of insights into the Lady Senator's thoughts on the current galactic situation. The speech was delivered with Senator Wren standing atop a platform beside the statue of Reidi Artom in Gadrin's main square. The outfit Wren wears is a spacer's outfit, very similar to the one Artom wears in the statue.

Friends, it makes me glad to return to Cularin. No matter how many years I live on Coruscant, or on the lanes that run between the worlds, this will always be home to me. It fills my heart with joy to see so many of you here to welcome me back, even if my visit will ultimately be far too short.

It is a trying time for the Republic. There is no point in trying to make the situation other than what it is. We are at war, and the worst of it is, we are at war with ourselves. Cularin, for better or worse, has been left out of the battles; with no standing army to speak of, the Senate had nothing to conscript, even had we been present when the war began. Our militia will suffice for what defense we need, beyond what our friends from Thaere provide.

We here in Cularin fly in a small ship. I've seen the effects myself, on Coruscant, a world of big ships and bigger ideas. I've done my best to pilot our small ship through the traffic of the big world without bringing us to harm, and any of you who've tried such a feat know that being a small ship is both good and bad. It is easy, sometimes, to escape the notice of the big ships. It is easy to slide into slips where larger ships cannot dock, to be subtle where larger ships can only barrel straight ahead and hope everything that needs to can get out of the way. There are advantages to being small.

But there are also challenges. The small ship that is Cularin must be piloted with great care, to ensure that the larger ships remain aware of us. There are those who could run Cularin over, who could fire up their engines with us too nearby and burn us out of existence without ever knowing they'd touched our

lives. The subtlety, the ability to remain unnoticed, is both the best and the worst part of piloting a ship as small as ours.

I do not claim to have been the best of pilots, but I have worked hard these past few years to do what I can to ensure that our ship is noticed when it needs to be, and not noticed when that would be for the best.

I had worried, for a time, that Cularin might become a military target for the Separatists -- or, if not Cularin proper, then, at the very least, Almas. I will paraphrase what Master Windu has said: The Jedi are protectors, not soldiers. And yet, these protectors -- led by Master Yoda, Master Windu, and others -- form the very heart of so much that seeks to defend the Republic from the divisive tactics of the Separatists. A strike at Coruscant would be sheer folly, but a strike at Almas, one of the largest facilities to train Jedi in the galaxy, would threaten the lives of Jedi and civilian alike.

Not that I have any doubt of the ability of the Jedi to defend themselves. Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk is one of the wisest, most capable beings I have ever had the pleasure to meet. But if the armies of the Separatists were loosed upon Almas, how long could any group, no matter how powerful, hold out? One lesson of the battle of Geonosis is that Jedi are mortal, just like the rest of us. A thousand myths, and many more living beings, died that day. Jedi are mortal, as are we all, and if the mortal Jedi may be targets, then we must ensure that we are all protected.

This is why we continue to enlist the assistance of the Navy of Thaere to protect Cularin's borders. The Separatist armies could strike anywhere, at any time. The annoyance that is our comet cloud and the various geospatial anomalies that keep hyperspace travel from working properly into or out of Cularin are also our best defense. With a strong force to patrol our borders, it becomes much less likely that the Separatists will attempt to upset the balance of life for any of us - Jedi or not.

[At this point, there is a ruckus in the back of the audience. The cameras pan in that direction and we see a squad of twenty or more Thaereian military personnel surrounding a group of three Humans. Binders are waved around, and the three Humans are subdued and dragged away, shouting "Down with the Supreme Chancellor!" When the camera pans back to Wren, she looks somewhat paler than before, but the color returns as she forces a smile and begins to speak again.]

It appears that we have three fewer Separatists in the system, thanks to the Thaereian Navy. We should be . . . grateful that they are here and helping us to keep peace. If there seem to be more of them than before in the system, that is because the war has escalated across the galaxy, and we, like everyone else, need protection. The Senate was kind enough to appoint Thaere as Cularin's protector some time ago, and that we have a protector is something for which we should be thankful. It may be that the vessel in which we find ourselves is not the vessel we might have chosen, but it's easier to fly to Coruscant in a ship we find unpleasant than it is to walk.

Where do we go, then? What do we do? What is going to happen to the galaxy? My friends, I wish I could tell you. I do. What I know is this: The thing that matters most, to all of us, is the preservation of our way of life. The Republic is strong. The Republic is kind and generous. The Republic *works*. It is in all of our best interests to keep the Republic intact, and so long as I remain Senator for Cularin, I will stand with the Loyalists. Our armies, commanded by the wise Jedi, are smart and quick and will defeat the droid armies of the Separatists.

We cannot allow the Republic to fragment. We cannot stand by and watch something that has endured for a thousand generations vanish because a handful of over-proud fools believe they can do it "better." The lessons we have learned, the things we have seen, the victories we have won as part of the Republic -- all of that is what stands to be lost. All of that is what we give up, if the Separatists succeed in tearing our beloved Republic apart.

So I say this to you: As I stand here before you today, I serve the Republic. I am loyal to the Republic, to the Senate, and to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. I will fight to preserve that which you have set me to represent, not only because I believe it is right, but because it is the mandate that I have received from you. Find ways to support the Republic. Do what you can. But take care. We still fly a small ship, and the galaxy is larger than any of us have imagined.

Long live the Republic!

Burnout

Recently, an interview began making the rounds of the Holonet in the Cularin area. The interview consists of a conversation between two figures, both of whom are backlit so that only their outlines are visible, and both of whom seem to have gone to some length to disguise their voices. The interviewer is female,

but beyond that, little can be discerned. She speaks deliberately, and the attempt to modify her speech patterns is clear. She speaks Basic, and the colloquialisms she uses reveal that, if she's not actually native to Cularin, she's been here for some time. The interviewee, on the other hand, speaks roughly, in Basic that's sometimes broken with phrases in Dosh or Rodian. He -- and there can be no doubt that the interviewee is male, as can be seen from the content of the interview -- fidgets in his seat, seemingly worried that the interview might end without warning. There are no newsnet logos attached, and no single newsnet in Cularin has claimed responsibility, though all of them have run the interview exhaustively. The message that comes across has many in the system more than a little concerned.

Interviewer: Thank you for contacting me. I'm glad you did. What should I call you?

Interviewee: Don't matter. X. Just call me X. This all gonna be masked?

Interviewer: Absolutely. You have my word on it. No one will be able to trace it to you.

X: And you?

Interviewer: I'm masked as well. No one will be able to find me and beat your identity out of me. Everything is as safe as it can be, considering the circumstances. May I set the stage?

She pauses, and the shadow opposite her nods.

Interviewer: I'm here, speaking with X. X is a member of a very prominent trade organization here in Cularin. One that's run by locals, rather than the often-problematic Metatheran Cartel. X contacted me, under conditions of anonymity, to request an interview. He's learned things that the people of Cularin should know about, if they're to defend themselves from all the threats that have emerged in the last few months, and which will likely continue to emerge. So tell me, X -- what is it that we need to know?

X: It's Burnout.

Interviewer: What *is* Burnout?

X: Burnout's a space station in Thaereian space. Nasty place. Don't want to go

there if you don't have to. There's bad places in Thaere, but not many as bad as Burnout.

Interviewer: And what's so bad about this place, this "Burnout"?

X: What goes on there. You take every bad thing Riboga did, when he ran Cularin. You multiply that times ten. You then figure out how you can take what you get, and make it even worse. Then you kinda get close to what Burnout's like.

Interviewer: Sounds unpleasant. Can you give us some examples?

X: Well, there's the standard. They run spice through there, for one. Other chems, they've got a regular pipeline. Weapons, information -- lots of Bothans in Thaere, and they dig on the information brokerage -- even people. Lots of people.

Interviewer: Burnout is a slave trading facility?

X: Sort of. It's lots more than that, but they run slaves through there. It's got pens in it, corrals, almost. It's not just slaves, it's animals, too. Exotics. If there's something someone might want to buy, but maybe the Senate doesn't like that kind of thing being sold, well, you can probably find someone shipping it through Burnout.

Interviewer: I'm sure our viewers will find it hard to believe that the government of Thaere allows this kind of activity to continue within their borders. After all, they're a duly assigned protector of Cularin, with a mandate from the Galactic Senate. They wouldn't allow this kind of Hutt-trading to go on, so it must be that they don't know. That's the only logical explanation, isn't it?

X: You aren't that dumb. Your viewers aren't that dumb. Thaere, it's more than it looks like, and less. You wanna talk government? *[Swears in Dosh]* Their government is their navy. No other public infrastructure there. Oh, they've gone through some leadership changes, but tell you what -- they don't listen to nobody who don't have the backing of the navy. That Tramsig, he's the real power in Thaere. So when we're talking about the government of Thaere, we're really talking about their navy. Now, what that makes your question say is, does Thaere's navy know about this place, with the slaves and the drugs and the weapons that nobody who's not in the army should have? And the answer

is, they ain't dumb. They see as good as anyone. They know what's going on.

Interviewer: Tell our viewers what the Thaereian Navy is doing about this problem, then.

X: Doing? I'll tell you what they're doing. They're investing. It's not a problem. It's an opportunity. It's a way for them to make a little money, maybe a lot of money.

Interviewer: Are you suggesting that the Thaereian Navy, the appointed protectors of Cularin, are corrupt?

X: Nope. You can't be corrupt if everyone's doing the same thing. Corruption's a sickness. It's that little infected part of something that may make the rest of the body sick, and maybe kill you. If the whole body's sick, though, and it's got a fever that just makes it want to do more of the stuff that got it sick, that's not corruption. That's just plain wrong. I ain't no Jedi, but if I were, I'd probably say something like the whole Thaereian Navy is darksiders.

Interviewer: That's disturbing. If a Jedi said it, that might mean the Thaereians had a large number of Force-users at their disposal. Is that what you mean?

X: No. Just armies of people who will do whatever they're told. You look at what's happened over the last couple years -- our timeline -- and you see that they've had folks defect. Most of them ran as far away as they could, but there's some that joined up with Cularin's militia. One of the commanders, even, in the new militia. You don't need an army of people who use the Force to kill folks. You just need an army, and with a big enough army, it don't matter how many Force users are against you.

Interviewer: Even a whole Jedi academy?

X: How big an army you think you'd want to bring, if you were going to try to hold Cularin with that many Jedi and baby Jedi here? Think about that number, and then think about this. There are 173,000 soldiers in the Thaereian Navy.

The interviewer shuffles her notes.

Interviewer: Where did you get that number? I've not heard anything bigger than . . . "Standing forces of 10,000 assigned to protection of Cularin." That's

from their charter.

X: Yeah. Well, most of them don't read too good. And as to the numbers, well . . . once you get past what they can count on fingers and toes, it's all the same. Ten thousand, a hundred and seventy-three thousand -- either way, it's a lot. But I stand by my numbers. Besides, their charter don't say they can't have more. Just that ten thousand was how many they were required to put on Cularin defense duty. It's more. You run enough goods in and out of Cularin, you see how many ships there are, you figure out that there's a blasted lot of them. Big army. Not that many of us.

Interviewer: So, back to Burnout. Are you saying that the entire Thaereian military establishment is aware of, and profiting from, the existence of this immoral set of operations on Burnout?

X: Aware of? Sure. Profiting from? Don't be dumb. The ones that profit are the ones that always profit. The leaders. Everyone else just does what they're told and stays alive.

Interviewer: Is Burnout a threat to Cularin?

X: There's bigger threats. Burnout's just a stopover. It's a place things get traded. But some of those things are people. Cularin people. Folks disappear, and if they're never found, then maybe they got herded off to Burnout and sold to the Hutts.

Interviewer: Is Burnout a Hutt stronghold?

X: Don't think so. Never heard of one being there.

Interviewer: I think I -- that is, our viewers -- have a hard time believing that after everything Senator Wren and Nirama have done to prevent slavery in Cularin, that neither of them would react to hearing that Cularin citizens are being taken just outside our borders and sold into slavery.

X: If the Senator knew, maybe. Don't know if she does. She's on Coruscant, most of the time, taking care of home from a long ways away. As to Nirama . . . I'm betting he knows. And is pretty unhappy about it. But there's a right time and a right place to strike, and this may not be that time. Even if Burnout really is the right place. You don't get to be powerful like Nirama without knowing

when to fight and when not to fight.

Interviewer: He does seem rather astute. So, anything else our viewers need to know about Burnout? Aside from it being a slave-trading, drug-running, weapon-smuggling hive of malcontents and rejects from every corner of the galaxy, which the Thaereian Navy -- the body charged by the Galactic Senate with protecting Cularin -- knows about, and allows to continue to exist because of their own financial interests in the place?

X: I think that sums it up.

Interviewer: Thank you for your time. Burnout . . . it's something to keep an eye on, Cularin.

And with that, the transmission ends.

Devan

Jedi Master Devan For'deschel was the first individual from outside Cularin to set foot on any of the system's planets after the unfortunate events involving the Sith artifact known only as the darkstaff. Known to some of Cularin's citizens, who encountered her when she was a newly raised Jedi Knight on Coruscant, Master Devan had been one of a number of Jedi researching the occurrences around Cularin and trying to make sense of the absence of the system. It was not her only responsibility during those years -- in fact, it was only the most recent -- and she denies having had much to do with the breakthrough that ultimately allowed Cularin to return to contact with the remainder of the galaxy. She was an outsider who came to deliver a great deal of unsettling news with calm and poise, but her presence was welcome, and her continued efforts to assist Cularin in a challenging time of rebuilding trade alliances and re-forging diplomatic ties have made her almost, if not quite, a citizen of the system.

As the bulk of Cularin's Jedi Masters were sent to fight in the Clone Wars, Master Devan remained behind to aid in the transition and to assist Masters Lanius and Kirlocca in overseeing the training of Almas's many Padawans. With the loss of Kirlocca, Almas went from two "full-time" Jedi Masters plus Devan to only Master Lanius. Devan had assumed that her time on Almas would be

limited, but recently she received a communication from the Jedi Council. That communication contained, among other things, her appointment as the new Mistress of Lightsabers at the Almas Academy, until such time as another suitable replacement for Master Kirlocca could be found. Her experience with the system and her role in its already-strange history made her, in many ways, the only logical choice.

Master Devan's style with a lightsaber is much different from Kirlocca's. Where Kirlocca used his Wookiee strength to his advantage and pressed his offense whenever possible, Devan teaches a much more defensive form of lightsaber fighting. She is a master of the lightsaber form known as Djem So†, sometimes referred to as "Form V". She teaches that rushing the attack is the quickest way to fail, and that the enemy will often give you all the weaponry you need to defeat him. While Master Kirlocca did not claim mastery of any specific form, most in the Order who knew him credit him as having mastered Shii-Cho, Form I, though elements of multiple forms seemed to flow through his personal style.

Of her personal history, little is known. Master Devan is human, apparently in her early thirties, and often described with words like "tall" and "striking." Most of her training on Coruscant was under the watchful eye of Master Mace Windu, though his commitments to the Jedi Council made her training somewhat nonstandard (to the extent that there is a "standard" training regime for a Jedi Knight). In order to better understand Master Devan as an individual, we have collected a number of quotations from her. Out of context though they may be, the quotations offer insight into the mind of this extraordinary Jedi Master.

On the Role of the Jedi

Master Windu taught me that we are protectors, not soldiers. Right now, in our galaxy, there is little difference. Soldiers serve as protectors for what they believe to be right. That is what many Jedi are doing now. Even I -- who have found myself in the position of training many who may serve the dual role of protector-soldier -- have begun to see the distinction Master Windu taught for so long begin to break down. We Jedi must do everything in our power to protect the Republic. If that means going to war, then we go to war.

On Cularin

This system contains some of the most beautiful places and people ever. It's like a pocket of the galaxy that exists on its own terms. The people here are, by and large, good. Strong and proud, too. It makes sense that strength and pride would grow in a place where so much of the dark side once lurked, and perhaps continues to lurk. Because for all its beauty, I think Cularin may also be one of the most dangerous places I've ever lived. So many followers of the dark side, and such dark side energy . . . The Clone Wars haven't touched here. Yet. But something has.

On Master Lanius

A kind and brave man. Thoroughly committed to training Jedi. Do I agree with all of his methods? I'm not sure if they're for me to agree with. They're different than what I'm used to, but then, this is a different place than Coruscant. He and I have discussed curriculum issues since I arrived, and while I understand his choices, we may make some modifications. Just to bring things a little more tightly into line with how they're done on Coruscant. But I can see why every decision was made, and I can't fault him for any of them. Besides, the results speak for themselves. Jedi trained on Cularin have already made major contributions to the war effort and are well regarded throughout the galaxy. Even Cularin's Padawans have distinguished themselves when on assignment outside their home system.

On Her Role as a Jedi Master

I hadn't planned to become a Master. It was simply the most logical path that opened after my Padawan training was complete. I suppose I've got a few traits that the Council values, since there was a time when I felt as though I was being encouraged along that route. Maybe I still am, but after Geonosis, my skills were needed elsewhere. Including Cularin. The Council may still be in my future, but I'm not concerned about it. I'm pleased with where I am, and I know that I'm doing what is needed for the Jedi to assist in putting down the armies of the Separatists.

As to being a "Master," I will admit that the term has always unnerved me. I am not a "Master" of anything. I learn and grow every day. Claiming mastery would, to me, be equivalent to claiming that I had nothing more to learn, when that is clearly not the case. Most important, though, is my own certainty that I have not "mastered" the Force. The Force is not something any individual can master. It is part of us. We can learn to harness it, to shape it, to control some

small part of it -- but mastery? No. Not even Master Yoda would claim that. The only ones who might claim mastery of the Force are those who would abuse it. And, if you ask me, they haven't even mastered the most basic thing in the galaxy -- themselves.

Life's Memories

San Herrera and Nia Reston, two young Humans with nothing but the best of intentions follow what they perceive to be the will of the Force -- but in a non-Jedi fashion.

Recent months, including their own adventures, have given them a great deal to reflect upon, and issues of mortality weigh heavy on the minds of many in Cularin. In this -- their attempt at a scholarly treatise -- San and Nia discuss the meaning of "death," both as it is commonly understood and as they suggest we might better understand it in terms of the Force.

Thesis: In this paper, we will present the position that death is not well understood by the denizens of the galaxy, that a number of misconceptions and outright falsehoods exist, and that a different perspective may serve to better enable individuals to deal with the harsh reality of death. We discuss one such perspective and the advantages it may provide.

*What begins, ends.
What is born, dies.
All that is made can be un-made.
Dark has no meaning without light,
And for all living things
there is the final
silence.(1)*

The galaxy is wide, and the variety of species almost beyond counting. Hutt and Human, Verpine and Vuvrian -- the differences from one star system to another, even from one planet to another, can be astounding. Yet, for all the differences that exist across peoples(2) there is a common thread. All of us who live will, one day, die.

As children, we do not understand death. It is a specter, a threat that has no meaning to us. Who dies? We don't die. People talk about dying, but is it real? Of course not, because we ourselves have never died, nor do we plan to.

The mind of the child is incapable of grasping the concept of its own cessation. Some look at children and envy them; lucky, to not know that you will one day die.

Others look at children and pity them; a shame, that the child believes in something that can never be. A shame that one day the child will learn, as we did, that life ends, that everything we see and know and experience one day simply ceases to exist for us.

We ask this question: Who is to be envied, and who is to be pitied? We would argue that the "adults" in both of the above examples are, in fact, the ones to be pitied, as the adults have come to an understanding of "death" that is inherently flawed.

Does that mean that the children are to be envied? No. These children will be taught the "reality" of death by adults, many of whom possess a flawed understanding of what death means. They will learn to fear death. They will learn that death is something "bad," rather than a natural part of life. They will come to view death as an ending, rather than simply another step in what is, inherently, a natural progression.

This is a time, in Cularin and in the galaxy at large, in which many of us are considering the meaning of death. As war rages, we find ourselves faced daily with reports from battlefields on distant worlds, images of ships blasting away at other ships amidst fields of peaceful stars that will not change no matter what we do to one another. Even here, we lose those we love and respect, and many view such passings with sadness. At a recent memorial service, Mother Dariana spoke a few words about the service -- which was treated not as a time for mourning but as a celebration of a life well-lived -- in which she said the following: "This isn't about [the deceased]. That's what you learn, when you see enough of these. It's almost never about what the person who's moved on would have wanted. It's about what the people who are still living need."(3)

What do the living need, though? What is necessary to allow us to "cope" with death?

Perhaps the hardest part of death for many individuals to contend with is the feeling of emptiness, of loss, that results when someone who has been part of our lives is suddenly no longer. Certainly, there are elements of fear and uncertainty that play into that -- if the person is no longer here, where have

they gone? Did they simply cease to exist, and if so, does that not violate the basic laws of physics?

At this point, you may have become skeptical. How could death possibly violate a physical law? Well, consider this statement, treated as basic fact by every student of the sciences in the galaxy: Matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed; they can only change from one form to another.

When a living creature dies, it becomes inanimate. Any energy that was stored within that body is lost. *Lost*. Not *destroyed*. Even "lost," though, carries inaccurate connotations, since the energy cannot be lost but can only change from one form to another.(4)

To understand death, then, one must first understand that it is not truly a "loss" of anything. It is simply a transformation of the energy that provides the vital essence of the individual from one form to another.

The Force as Energy

While we are not Jedi, we do find many of their texts (at least, those made available to the general public) of great interest and help in understanding the meaning of death. Any student of the Force will likely recall the words of Jedi Master Ood Bnar, who wrote of the Force as a "mystical energy field" that surrounds all living things.(5) We suggest that this is the energy present in each of us, which animates us and gives us our individuality, and that when our bodies fail us, this energy changes form and merges once again with the Force, serving to bind the galaxy together.

The meaning of this should be immediately clear. Who we are -- who we *really* are, if we are to understand ourselves in the context of the galaxy and not just in an egocentric manner -- is not the body that others see. That body is flesh, which ages, withers, and dies. It is a vessel, a container, and one that does not always serve its purpose particularly well. Pimples, pus, embarrassing odors at inopportune moments -- these are reflections of the body we inhabit, not the person we are. The person we are exists on the inside. Not in the guts of the individual, but in the energy that courses through us, which makes us part of something greater than ourselves.

The key to understanding death (and life) is to realize that we all have the Force inside us. Not all of us are Jedi. Not all of us can even feel the Force, most of the time. But it is there. It is what makes us into something more than crude piles of matter that stumble our way through life. It is inside us all, and

we are part of it, and when we die, the energy that allowed us to live does not simply cease to exist. It merges once more into the Force, and the individual becomes part of the whole -- from which he was never separated, truly, to begin with.

The Jedi Code has it right, though it doesn't go far enough in explaining its words. Ultimately, the key to understanding and coping with death is to realize that it is not something to be feared; it is part of who we are. For a time, a small part of the Force takes up residence inside our bodies. The bodies, inevitably, fail. The Force lives on. Thus, death is not to be feared, because in a very real sense, "There is no death; there is the Force."(6)

(1)Translated from the Ithorian "Life's Memories" by Soshu Londahl, as originally published in the anthology *Lyrical Metaphysics: Ode on an Odon*, edited by Soshu Londahl, Coruscani Publishing.

(2)We use this term in the loosest possible sense; we are aware that some readers will view "people" as a Humanocentric term, since in Basic, "people" is often used to shorthand "Human" in everyday speech. We prefer a more inclusive understanding of the term, using "peoples" to refer to all the sentient creatures (and potentially nonsentients, though this may perhaps be stretching the term beyond its utility) that reside in the galaxy. If this usage offends, we apologize, but believe it to be the least exclusionary and most succinct of our linguistic options.

(3)Excerpted from Mother Dariana's memorial speech at the funeral celebration of a major Cularin figure, six months ago.

(4)This forces us to draw a distinction that is not wholly accurate, in our opinion, between the physical body and the energies that make us up. We will return to this distinction shortly.

(5)Ood Bnar, *Lectures on the Nature of the Force*; Jedi Temple, Coruscant.

(6)From "The Jedi Code."

Trouble Follows Us

The release of their treatise on the nature of death, "Life's Memories," brought a small level of fame to San Herrera and Nia Reston. Short enough to be consumed easily by holonet readers, the paper has people talking and wondering about the meaning of what occurs after the body has ceased to function. This has led to attention from the media, including an interview with Yara Grugara. San and Nia had one idea about how the interview might go. As is often the case, though, Yara had a completely different idea . . .

[San and Nia sit beside each other on a thickly padded sofa with a very tall back. They are relatively clean and presentable, though both of them look more than a little pale and glance in the direction of the holorecorder a number of times. Yara sits in a chair opposite them, clicking at her datapad, reviewing notes, and "Mm-hmm"-ing every few seconds. She looks up, eventually, and smiles.]

Yara: Good evening, and welcome to "Eye on Cularin." This is Yara Grugara reporting, and tonight I have the distinct pleasure of interviewing two of Cularin's newest intellectual celebrities -- San Herrera and Nia Reston. Wave to the camera, kids!

[San and Nia look somewhat stunned, but turn and wave to the holorecorder.]

Yara: Now, you've caused quite a stir lately with that little ditty on death, right? What's that called?

San: It's, um, called "Life's Memories." It's not really a "ditty," though. It's a scholarly treatment --

Yara: Right. Yara thinks we've all read it. Interesting stuff.

Nia: Thank you. We'd really like to talk about --

Yara: You know, you two have interesting lives. Yara's had her people working on understanding you better so we could get a frame for this interview. You know, why two such normal kids would decide to spend their time thinking and writing about death?

San: We're really not kids. I'm twenty-three, and Nia's twenty-two.

Yara: So young, to be so morbid.

San: I don't think we're morbid at all. There are lots of morbid ways to write about death, but that wasn't one of them.

Nia: It was really hopeful. I mean, it is. Hopeful. The paper. Because we don't argue that death is bad, just that it's something that we really don't think about right. I think the Jedi do, to some extent, but you know how the Jedi are. They preach a lot to their own, but don't preach so much to anyone outside. Aren't you one of the people who said that the Jedi aren't doing enough to protect Cularin? Wouldn't telling us how to cope with death count as helping Cularin?

Yara: You're taking Yara's comments out of context. What Yara said was that the Jedi have been too reactive -- not proactive enough. But as has been reported in other outlets, as well as in a previous "Eye on Cularin" special report, Yara was *not* herself that day. Voluntary drug tests later showed that someone had put something in Yara's drink, and my judgment was impaired. Yara made a spectacle of herself, and has apologized over and over for what was done. Believe it, there was much scraping and pleading to keep the interview Yara has scheduled soon with Master Lanius!

[San and Nia look unconvinced.]

Yara: So, you've pretty much made the rounds of Cularin, haven't you? I understand some of your early efforts involved organizing relief missions to the Tarasin. Was that necessary?

Nia: No, as it turns out. We'd convinced ourselves that they were primitives who needed our assistance --

San: *Anyone's* assistance.

Nia: Right. We thought they needed assistance to live. Turns out they really don't. They've been doing fine here for generations. We just kind of assumed that they had to have our help.

San: We actually developed some of our theory about death based on Mother Dariana's --

Yara: Now, this was about the same time that the Cartel was setting up their secret base on Cularin, right? The one that they themselves ended up blasting

out of existence from orbit when it was discovered that the leader on Cularin was a Force-user who had a stolen lightsaber in his possession?

San: That was about the same time, yes.

Yara: So, you were around the jungle while the Cartel was?

Nia: Lots of people were. Are you suggesting we had something to do with them?

Yara: Well, let's face it. You two do seem to turn up in an awful lot of interesting places. Isn't that so? We've got the two of you taking supplies into the jungles of Cularin while the Cartel was establishing their base, correct?

San: We had no idea. Honestly. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Yara: Like Uffel?

[San and Nia both blush, then look at one another. Yara waits patiently for a response.]

San: See, here's the thing. We went there when a lot of people were going there, to see the facility and find out what was going on. And, well, we got asked to help out. There were a few groups of people who were helping out. It was us, and a few others -- there was Philinda, and . . . Nia, who else was there?

Nia: Oh, of course. You remember *her*. You know, Yara, for six months he kept calling her "the hot one"?

Yara: Oh?

Nia: Oh, yes. "Let's go see if the hot one wants to do something." "Let's call up the hot one and see if she's heard of any new jobs." Hot one this, hot one that. I mean, she's cute and all, but it's not like she's the ultimate female. She's just got loads of charisma.

Yara: That sounds like jealousy. Are you two an item?

San: No.

Nia: Yes.

[They look at each other.]

San: Yes.

Nia: No.

Yara: Right. So, you're on Uffel with the hot one and a few others who weren't so hot. What happened then?

Nia: Well, *someone* decided that we were going to listen to what every stupid droid in the place told us, so when one of them told us that there was this group of non-droids wandering around committing acts of sabotage, and hey, they're in the next room, well, *someone* decided we should rush in there and take them down. You know, for the good of the system.

Yara: Didn't work, did it?

San: May I?

[He doesn't wait for an answer.]

San: We'd been misled. I think we all felt pretty foolish when we attacked, and it was some of the same people we'd had helping us when we took goods out to the Tarasin. The droid set us up so that we might get killed, or kill some of the people who were actually there to capture the droid.

Yara: Wrong place, wrong time?

Nia: Very much. And listening to the wrong people. Well, droids.

Yara: So, what happens when a droid dies?

[For several seconds, San and Nia say nothing. Then they seem to remember what the interview is supposed to be about.]

San: Well, nothing. They're not really alive, so they can't die.

Nia: I'm not so sure. I mean, they can think and talk, and sometimes you get the impression that they can feel things, too. Not quite the same way we do. They're sentient, after all.

San: But they're machines. There's no Force in them.

Nia: See, Yara, this is something we disagree on. The whole "what is life?" issue. He thinks that if something doesn't have some sort of organic processes going on, if it doesn't breathe or have a heartbeat or whatever, then it's not really alive. And I think he's foolish, because we've seen so many different kinds of life that we can't really say that just because something is different, it's not alive or there's no Force in it.

San: Except that droids aren't born, they're made.

Nia: By that logic, clones aren't alive, since they're made in vats. So there's no Force in clones?

San: I didn't say that.

Nia: You did!

San: Did not.

Nia: Did too!

Yara: Children, that's all very interesting. Why don't you write another paper some time on the possibility of the Force existing in a droid, and we'll have another of these fascinating chats. For now, though, tell me about Tilnes.

San: Um . . . do we really have to?

Yara: Why? Was the hot one there?

[Nia grunts and looks away.]

Yara: I'll take that as a yes. So, you were on Tilnes when the secret Cartel base there was discovered, as well as the secret Thaereian base.

San: When you put it that way, it really doesn't sound too good, does it?

Yara: I don't know what you mean.

San: Look, I think that you've done your homework. Or your staff has. And you're right. One of the reasons we wrote what we did is that we needed to figure it out. I mean, death. Since it seems to show up when we're around.

Yara: Trouble follows you, yes?

San: I suppose it does. We'll let you know if we write that droid piece.

[Yara smiles. The "Eye on Cularin" theme swells in the background, and we fade out.]

The Darkstaff

What terrible evil lurks at the heart of the Cularin system? The recent discovery of Darth Rivan's journals cast light on a dangerous object known as the darkstaff.

For several years, Cularin was gone, leaving an emptiness where planets and moons once orbited two suns that also disappeared. From outside the system, nothing was known of what might have occurred. One moment, Cularin was present. The next, it was not.

Some of the heroes of Cularin, though, saw what precipitated the disappearance. They saw Len Markus remove something from the asteroid belt. They saw the creatures that live in the shadows of the Belt. They saw glimpses of what might have been, and central to it all was a black rod a meter long -- something Len's datapad referred to as "the darkstaff."

Little was known about the darkstaff until recently, when a team of Jedi researchers made their way once more into the bowels of the Sith fortress beneath Almas and emerged with a pair of ancient books. These tomes, believed to be remnants of Darth Rivan's personal journals, have been turned over to the Jedi Council. What follows is an excerpt of one of the few sections that has been made publicly accessible through the HoloNet.

One must wonder: If this is what the Jedi believe the galaxy is prepared to know, what else might be hidden in the tomes?

The natives -- if one can call them that, since I've seen their kind elsewhere in the galaxy, though they are one of the few species I've run across who have managed to actually *lose* the capacity for hyperspace travel -- are tolerable enough. They have their planet, and they don't leave it. They can't, having eschewed even the technology that would allow them to move beyond the

peaks of those pathetic rock piles they call "mountains." I go to that world sometimes to see what they are doing, and to see if they have any recollection of what brought them here. They don't know. It was a drawing for them, and they arrived, and they believed it to be their own will that brought them here, that trapped them in this backwater of the galaxy.

There is much to be said for backwaters, though. I myself often find comfort in visiting places others avoid. More often than not, there is a cool darkness awaiting, a moistness like the air after a rain shower beneath a moonlit sky. The typical individual finds such darkness uncomfortable. Uninviting. Dangerous.

That is because they do not understand.

Darkness is a friend, an ally. Darkness allows us to understand others, to see what they value when they believe no one else is looking. It allows us to be honest with ourselves, to express those values that we would disavow in the light. The light blinds us. It is only in the dark that we see clearly, and there is a great dark hidden among these worlds.

I had thought that the darkness would be here, beneath the frozen sands. Cold frightens the foolish just as certainly as dark, and the two go together. But as the world begins to thaw, as the kaluthin finally take root, I am finding that there is no more darkness here than that which I find wherever I go. This world has never known life at more than a microscopic level. That can change. This world has never known progress that did not involve the shifting of sands as the winds whipped up and the planet slowly spun on its axis. That, too, can change.

I like the dark and the cold. I like that the suns are so far away. I like that there is something nearby -- not on this planet, but in this system -- that drew those creatures here, and that even now, continues to call out to me.

I do not want it for myself. I want to destroy it.

I could not wield it. I would not. It would not make me more powerful; it would destroy me. And so, I want it gone, erased from the galaxy. Nothing that has the power to destroy me should be allowed to continue to exist, no matter how sweet the promises it makes, no matter how dark the night would be if I held it. It must be destroyed.

The dreams trouble me, if only somewhat. I see the thing (which I have taken to calling the "darkstaff," though it scarcely qualifies as a staff, since I imagine such things as being nearly as long as I am tall) not as an object, but as an absence. It is an emptiness, a slice of the universe where there is no light and no heat, but also no cold and no dark. Light moves around it but does not come into its grasp. It doesn't want the light. It wants the Force.

That is what makes this darkstaff so insidious. If it were a tool, something I could use to harness the Force to my own ends, to demonstrate the reality of pain and suffering to the remainder of the galaxy, I might want to wield it. There are still times that I think, "Yes, I could take it and use it against everyone else. I could use it to drain the Force from their bodies, to watch them crumble to dust as their essence evaporated." But I know such thoughts are not my own. They are the darkstaff's thoughts. It would use me to drain others, and then it would drain me.

It pulled me here. It will pull more of us here. But I will do what none of them have the wisdom to do. I, who know what I face, will build on this world a defense, a means of ensuring that this object cannot ever be taken from this system.

I've been working with a holocron, trying to pull up anything that might allow me to better understand the darkstaff. I now believe it was created by one of my forebears, though the generations that have passed since its creation I cannot count. I also have trouble fathoming why the thing would have ever been made, and I have come to conclude that it was an accident, a byproduct of some strange experiment that could not be undone -- and that ultimately was the undoing of its creator.

The Force is our tool, after all. It is what makes us powerful, what allows us to stand above those who would put us down. An object that feeds upon the Force -- which may, in fact, *store* the Force within it, for whatever purposes it might ultimately have -- is antithetical to our existence, and any of us who created such a thing would surely have wanted it destroyed. Yet it exists, and any record of its creator is long gone.

I've not seen it physically, but I know what it looks like. One meter in length and perhaps four centimeters in diameter, it sucks at the light just as it sucks at the Force. It wants energy, power. It wants to destroy. It wants to end lives. It *wants* -- and that, by itself, is the most disturbing aspect, the reason that I fear

it and desire it and seek to destroy it.

The thing *wants*.

Ambition is dangerous enough in a living creature. In an object, a creation with nothing to lose, it can be catastrophic.

Part of the darkness in this system is the afterimage of a scream. It's comforting. Most places, you cannot feel death. Here, it is part of the very fabric of existence. Something truly horrible, wretched beyond words, happened. That is what keeps the fearful far from here, and what draws the curious in.

That scream came from the last time the darkstaff surged. It was held and given power, and then asked to provide something in return. It did. It provided death.

I respect that. But I will not serve a tool that seeks my demise, that wants my power. I will build defenses, and when I am ready, I will go to the darkness and bring it to the wretched light.

I must. If I am to live forever, there is no other way.

Thurm Loogg Speaks

Thurm Loogg and the Metatheran Cartel have not enjoyed much popularity in Cularin over the past few years. Following the debacle with the ch'hala grove (widely regarded by the Cartel as a "nightmare," though whether they use this word in terms of public relations or the actual effects of their actions remains unclear), Loogg ascended to command of the Cartel in Cularin. His predecessor, the late Velin Wir, did a great deal to harm the image of the Cartel -- and, for some reason, Loogg has yet to undo the damage. Whether he believed that simultaneously broadcasting the following message to every receiving device in the system would help the Cartel's image remains (as is true of so much with regard to the Cartel) a mystery.

Hello, Cularin! It is I, the beneficent Thurm Loogg, representative of the omnibenevolent Metatheran Cartel, and I am here to speak to you.

Now, I know what you are saying. "Why is Thurm Loogg appearing so suddenly on my datapad, or on my holovid? Is it possible that this face of kindness could be where I did not think it was?"

Take heart, Cularin, for the Cartel is everywhere! This transmission is our way to thank you for all you have done for the Cartel, and to remind you how very, very much the Cartel loves Cularin.

How much do we love you? I will tell you. You will listen. Some time ago, we learned that a certain problem had developed in the Cularin holonet. There is, shall we say, a security breach. Oh, it is true, it is true! A most frightening thing, a security breach, especially one that allows so many datastreams to be accessed by someone with the proper equipment. When the Cartel learned of the situation, we spoke about what to do, and it was decided that we could not allow Cularin to continue in such a fashion. It would be bad for all of us if someone were to learn too much or see too much. Very bad.

So, to show how much we love you and how much we care, today we exploit the weakness in the system to demonstrate just how flawed the system is. That is right, we love you enough to exploit weaknesses in your defenses!

But only to help, of course. We would never, never use any information that we gained about the financial policies of Governor Chistor's administration to our own advantage. Goodness no! And we would certainly never consider capturing encrypted data sent from the Jedi academy to the Jedi Council on Coruscant, decrypting it, and selling it to someone else. Not the Cartel! And it goes without saying that we would not even consider paying attention to transmissions from gracious Lord Nirama's ships to their leader, in which they outline weaknesses in the Thaereian perimeter around the system. It would be rude!

There is too much that we owe Cularin and the heroes of Cularin. All you have done for the Cartel is not forgotten! Why, some of you have visited Caarimon, and few in the galaxy can make such a claim. Caarimon, beautiful Caarimon . . . We understand that some of you even wish to marry into Caarite society, to become more like us.

I cannot blame you. To be a Caarite is almost to be part of the Cartel, and it must be very difficult indeed to watch the Cartel, in its beneficence, work in Cularin, and to know you cannot be a part of it.

It saddened me that the galaxy found itself in such turmoil that our plan to allow you to invest in the Cartel never came to fruition. You would have made so many credits, you would not have known what to do! You would have had the finances to go to a surgeon and even begin to look more like a member of the Cartel. So many things would have been better, but it was not to be. It is too bad.

At least some of you have begun doing contract work for us. That is good. That you do not speak of it to your shipmates or neighbors troubles us, but that is all right. We understand that there is still much anger over the trees that my most unwise predecessor had removed from Cularin, and that you feel you must hide your allegiance to the Cartel, though it pains you in your heart.

I am certain you are saying to yourself, "Is this all the munificent Thurm Loogg has to say to me? Is he only going to talk and talk and say nothing about current matters?"

Of course I will say something! Many things are not good right now, but the Cartel wishes to make them better. That is why we have begun another celebration. The Cartel enjoys celebrations, and we have seen how very cathartic they are to you. Why, it was only a year ago that so many of you took pleasure in firing on a droid effigy of myself.

I am so flattered. It means a great deal to me that you would take time out of your busy schedules of hunting Sith and fighting against threats from across the galaxy to shoot at a likeness of my humble self. It is a mark of your affection for me, I know, and it is something that I return with all my hearts.

I return the *affection*, of course. Not the desire to shoot at you. I would never want to shoot at you - I cannot shoot at all, so it would do no good! I am no more able to shoot a blaster than lovely Senator Wren or honorable Governor Chistor or respected Master Lanius. Those of us who find so many lives under our control would never consider brandishing a blaster against those who need us so much. That would be silly. You would not love us nearly so much if we shot you.

It has become clear to the Cartel that many of you desire a target for your hostility. Cularin is quite a hostile place, is it not? But then, the galaxy is quite a hostile place. The galaxy is the galaxy, though, and this is your home. Certainly, one should always defend one's home. But from whom do you defend it?

I, Thurm Loogg, will offer suggestions. First, you should defend your home against any Sith that happen to come to Cularin.

Sith are bad. You should not want them here. They should be your first priority in removing threats. Beware the Sith, because they are sneaky! They may already be among us, so you should look for them. Spend great amounts of time looking for them, and the harder you look, the more any Sith will say, "You know, Cularin does not like Sith. Perhaps I should leave." And then they will leave, and you will be safe.

Does that not sound like a good idea?

Oh, and may I mention that there has never been a Caarite Sith Lord?

I believe you should also defend yourselves against the droid armies of the Separatists. Bad Separatists! Evil Count Dooku has split the galaxy. He is a bad man! If evil Count Dooku comes to Cularin, you should hunt him down! If the droid armies of the Separatists come to Cularin, you should destroy them!

After all, we have seen that the brave citizens of Cularin excel at shooting droids.

For that matter, there is not much that the citizens of Cularin do not excel at shooting, is there?

That is a joke! I am only teasing you. There are things you are very bad at shooting. Trees. Rocks. Small furry creatures.

By the way, have I mentioned that the Cartel stands quite firmly behind Supreme Chancellor Palpatine? Separatists are bad! Down with Separatists! Clones are our friends. The Cartel loves clones!

It is also very worth your time to defend Cularin from maddened gundarks. Now, I can hear you saying, "But Thurm Loogg, we have seen very few gundarks in Cularin. Why should we worry about them?" I ask you this, Cularin: Have you ever seen the devastation that can be wrought by a maddened gundark? If not, you will have to take my word for it. You do not want a maddened gundark loose in Cularin. Eschew mad gundarks, defend your borders against their entry!

I feel obliged to point out that the Cartel does not now, nor has it ever, trafficked in gundarks.

You may have seen my point by now. I hope you have. The Cartel is not a threat to Cularin! Rumors you may have heard about the Cartel working with the Thaereians are simply untrue! We must move our goods through their perimeter, but we do so just as any other legitimate business does. With bribes and smuggling.

This is a joke! The Cartel will never be caught bribing or smuggling. Aside from the one time with the ch'hala trees, but that was not really the Cartel, per se. Just one poor, misbegotten individual driven mad by too much time in hyperspace.

Well, as much as it pains me to say, my expert Cartel technicians are telling me that several individuals in the system have tapped into our feed and are, even as I speak, attempting to close the security problems that allowed this transmission to be possible. So, I wish you good evening. May the For—

Jurisdiction

For years, Cularin has been a protectorate of neighboring Thaere. But is their dubious presence still needed, or even welcome? To tackle this issue, host Yara Grugara moderates a lively panel discussion that degenerates into insults and violence.

For years, Cularin has been a protectorate of Thaere, a neighboring system. The absence of any standing military in Cularin made it necessary that someone be appointed to defend its borders, and Thaere (with its sizable Navy) was chosen by the Galactic Senate to fill this role. Over the past two years, Cularin's militia has been growing, and with it has grown a disdain for "protection" from outside the system. Individuals who call Cularin home have begun to wonder what, precisely, Thaere has to gain from this arrangement. Recent increases in patrols, coupled with many (unconfirmed) reports of secret Thaereian bases throughout the system, have led to no small amount of discontent.

Based on the popular outcry, a panel of experts was assembled to discuss issues relating to Thaere, the role its Navy plays in Cularin, and whether Cularin's status as a protectorate should be re-evaluated. The panel invited to the discussion and their affiliations are listed below. Note that each individual

will only be identified by name (not affiliation) in the reporting of the dialogue.

Colonel Hyx Modant: Bothan Envoy from the Thaereian Navy

Osten Dal'Nay: Human Commander, Cularin Naval Militia

Sa'arli: Tarasin Aide to Senator Lavina Wren

Minos: Human Jedi Knight, Almas Academy

Sgt. Yadfre: Trandoshan Personnel Liaison, Office of Peace and Security, Gadrin

Yara Grugara: Moderator of the discussion, Cularin Central Broadcasting

The panelists are arrayed around a circular table. Yara sits directly opposite the holorecorder. She looks determined. Directly to her right is Sa'arli, a female Tarasin with a tattoo of a snakelike lizard whose tail runs from her jawline to up around her ear-slit. To Sa'arli's right is Colonel Modant, in full Thaereian military regalia. Directly on Yara's left is a Human male of middle years wearing Jedi robes. Beside the Jedi is a Trandoshan wearing an OPS uniform, and at the far end of the table is Osten Dal'Nay, Commander of the Cularin Militia naval forces. He is notably not wearing his uniform today.

Yara (smiling somewhat nervously at the holorecorder): Welcome, Cularin, to a discussion I'm sure you're all very interested in. That being, a discussion of the role of the Thaereian Navy inside of Cularin. We have a number of --

Colonel Modant: We can end the discussion before it even starts, young woman. Thaere has a mandate from the Galactic Senate to protect Cularin, and we will continue to do so.

Yara: Of course. Cularin, let me introduce Colonel Hyx Modant of the Thaereian Navy. We asked Admiral Tramsig to be here to talk to us today, but he was too busy, so he sent -- what do you prefer, Colonel? Lackey, toady, errand-boy -- any preference?

Modant: Call me "Sir."

Yara: Uh-huh. Seated next to Sir, we have --

Modant: Colonel Modant.

Yara: No, you're Colonel Modant. Next to you is Sa'arli, an aide of Senator Wren's.

Modant: No, *call me* Colonel Modant.

Yara: Sir, you're not the only person on this panel, and you can't monopolize the discussion by constantly changing your mind about what you want to be called. We'll never get to the issue at hand. Now, to my left we have Minos, a Knight at the academy here in Cularin, to his left is Sergeant Yadfre, of the Office of Peace and Security, and at the far end is Osten Dal'Nay. Now, Osten -- can I call you Osten?

Modant: You could call him "traitor".

Osten doesn't so much as look at Modant.

Osten: Osten is fine, thanks.

Yara: Osten, you're the commander of the naval portion of the Cularin Militia. Shouldn't you be in uniform?

Osten: Yara, if I were here as a representative of the militia, I would be. But I'm here as a representative of all the people of Cularin. So no uniform.

Yara: Fascinating. And you know, the shirt you've chosen . . . Sorry. I used to do fashion pieces. Force of habit. We're here today to discuss the continued presence of the Thaereian Navy in Cularin. Good, bad, or indifferent?

Osten: Thaere's presence is no longer needed. We have our own militia. We can take care of ourselves. The fact that they're here is just a holdover from a time when we didn't have a militia. The people of Cularin do not need "help" from places like Thaere, especially not when that "help" comes in secret bases and ships hidden in Genarius!

Modant applauds slowly.

Modant: Bravo. Is that all? Because if that's the extent of the argument against Thaere, then I fear there's really no argument to be had. You have a fledgling militia with a handful of ships that's run by a traitor and a Gungan. A *Gungan*. You couldn't protect yourselves from a mynock with digestive problems.

Osten: Not quite the way I would have characterized you, but not that far off.

Yara: Sir makes an interesting point. Is the militia able to defend Cularin? And

does it have to be the only defense available to us? Sergeant Yadfref?

Yadfref: What? Oh, um . . . well, the thing is, the militia, it seems like a good idea. And there are lots of other things, Cularin has defenses that have been here. Not military as such. OPS is one. I mean, not military. We can do things.

There is a short silence as Yadfref stops, and the others wait to see if he has anything else to say. He doesn't.

Yara: Right. Interesting point. Master Minos?

Minos: I'm not a Master, just a Knight.

Yara: Of course. Should I call you "Sir," too?

Minos: Just Minos, thank you. One "Sir" at the table is enough.

Yara laughs, perhaps a bit too loudly, and smiles broadly at Minos. She looks as though she's flirting with the Jedi Knight.

Minos: The point has been made a number of times of late, throughout the galaxy. The Jedi do not exist to fight wars. We can help to keep the peace, but ultimately, we are a small part of the system.

Modant: And rather impotent to protect even your own, yes? Isn't that something I heard *you* say, young woman, at a recent funeral?

Minos looks ready to reply, but Yara cuts him off.

Yara: I have apologized for that before. My director asked for a crowd shot, something with people fired up to defend their homes. I suggested, as part of a much longer speech that never aired, that the Jedi might not be capable of protecting the system -- which by themselves, they certainly aren't, as Knight Minos just pointed out. But the portion of my speech that was made public, where I was seen saying that they are unable to protect anyone, was taken out of context, and I very nearly quit my job over it. I have apologized to the Jedi, and now I make a formal apology to the people of Cularin. I firmly believe that we are lucky to have so many Jedi here in Cularin. And you, Sir . . .

Minos: May I? Sir, we all become one with the Force, eventually. There is no "protection" from that. What protection the Jedi provide is the protection of freedom, and the protection from tyranny. In many forms, and to the best of

our ability.

Modant: I'm not sure what you're doing here, since there is no tyranny or loss of freedom. Even Cularin's own Senator supports Thaere's presence. Isn't that correct?

Sa'arli: It is.

Her face colors, taking on shades of pink and orange, as she speaks. It quickly returns to a neutral green.

Modant: If the Senator supports Thaere, should the people not support Thaere as well?

Osten: Only if the people agree with the Senator. She could be wrong, you know.

Modant: Ah, but she isn't, and if she were, would it matter? We're here. Only the direct intervention of the Senate can revoke our protective charter.

Sa'arli: Technically, that's not true.

Modant turns and glares at her. She ignores him.

Yara: Oh? Do tell.

Sa'arli: A Senatorial protectorate only retains that status so long as certain conditions are met. For instance, the protecting agency must be loyal to the Senate and the Supreme Chancellor.

Modant: We are! Unequivocally.

Sa'arli: Of course. In addition, the process of life in the protected system cannot be disrupted by the protecting agency.

Osten: You mean by doing things like kidnapping Cularin citizens and selling them into slavery?

Modant: I have no idea what you're talking about.

Osten: How about killing Cularin citizens?

Modant: Cularin citizens kill one another every day. Seems to be something of a sport for you. If Cularin citizens were to attack duly-appointed protectors, we would defend ourselves. We wouldn't be doing anything you don't do to your own.

Sa'arli: Would you two please take your egos and go outside, if you can't be quiet?

Minos chuckles. Yara smiles. Yadfre looks like he's going to vomit or pass out, or both.

Yara: Is that all?

Sa'arli: No. The system can petition the Senate to revoke its protected status. However, this will be successful only with the support of that system's Senator --

Modant: Which you don't have, because Senator Wren supports Thaere. She knows it's what's best for the system. Isn't that true?

Sa'arli takes several long breaths before responding, and hints of color dart along the edges of her tattoo. When she speaks, the words are precise.

Sa'arli: Senator Wren supports the continued status of Thaere as a protector of Cularin.

Yara: That does make things difficult, doesn't it? Osten, thoughts?

Osten: If all we have to do is show that Thaere is disrupting life in Cularin to get these sadists out of our homes, then it's as good as done.

Modant: You have no proof of anything.

Osten: That you know of . . .

Modant shakes his head and looks at Yara.

Modant: This is the best you can do? I thought this was going to be a reasonable, rational dialogue, and I get name-calling?

Yara: That's not name-calling, Sir. Name calling would be . . . well . . .

Osten: Evil monkey-lizards whose parents bred with banthas?

Yara: That would be name-calling, yes.

Modant: Young woman, are you trying to create a diplomatic incident?

Sa'arli: I'm sure she isn't, since any diplomatic incident that involved someone like yourself might well bring the attention of the Senate on Thaere's activities and the ongoing situation in Cularin, distracting them from the Clone Wars. Is that accurate, Yara?

Yara: Um . . . Minos?

Minos: Stranger things have happened. Look -- Colonel, would you sit down? - things are as they are. If some among us feel that Thaere has overstepped its bounds, our Tarasin friend has provided us with a means of beginning the process of removing your navy. Barring that, the people of Cularin can petition their Senator to change her stance and have Thaere's protective charter revoked.

Modant: She won't do it.

He almost sneers as he says the words, then rises.

Modant: I've had enough of this nerf-herding. It's clear that you're all a bunch of malcontents with no shred of respect for the individuals who have protected your borders.

Osten: By blocking trade, seizing cargo, and conducting illegal searches?

Modant: More name-calling and unsupportable accusations.

Osten: Oh?

The viewscreen on the wall behind Yara springs to life. A Thaereian boarding party has just made its way aboard a cruiser of some kind, led by none other than Colonel Modant himself. Modant gestures to his soldiers, who begin to confiscate cargo as the owners of the ship, a pair of young Humans, protest.

Modant: A preposterous forgery.

He raises his blaster pistol and fires, and the screen explodes. The lights flicker,

and when they come back on, Modant is gone and everyone else is still seated at the table -- slightly singed, in some cases, but otherwise fine.

Yara: Well, that was enlightening. Does that qualify as a "diplomatic incident"? I can't tell. Any final comments? Osten?

Osten: "Thaere: If we don't like what we see, we shoot it."

Yara: Interesting. Sa'arli?

Sa'arli: I'm certain Senator Wren will hear of this, if she hasn't already. It doesn't change her position, though. Until such time as the militia is more firmly established, Cularin continues to need protection.

Yara: Courtesy of Thaere, or *from* Thaere? No, sorry. Forget I asked. Sergeant Yadfre?

Yadfre: Um . . . er . . .

He leans over, out of view of the holorecorder, and heaves up his lunch.

Yara: You said a mouthful. And then some. Minos?

Minos: I'm certain the entire system, and much of the galaxy, will have found this dialogue to be of interest. It seems that Admiral Tramsig might have sent a better representative to speak on behalf of Thaere.

Yara: Of course. Well, thank you all for being here, and special thanks to Sir, of the Thaereian Navy. We'll be sending him a bill. Now, if any of you would like to write to Senator Wren, the staff of the Almas Academy, or the Cularin Militia, or if you would like to make a donation to any of their coffers, here is their contact information.

A series of numbers flashes across the screen.

Yara: And if you'd like to let Colonel Modant know what you thought of him, his private comlink number is --

News of the Wyrd

Hello, Cularin! Yara Grugara here, reporting live from the edges of the jungles of Cularin. As you can see, there are lots of trees, and bushes, and flowers, and . . . well, lots of things that make it very clear that this is a jungle. If we were to go wandering around inside, we might run across a kilassin, or perhaps an RFB -- the local name given to the awful-smelling mulissiki that prowl these jungles. For a long time, most of us believed that those were the biggest threats that lived in these jungles. Recent events have proven otherwise.

If you haven't heard of the Wyrd yet, you will soon. The Wyrd are yet another in a long series of problems our fair system has had to face, and in Yara's mind, they're one of the most insidious. If reports are accurate, the individuals who make up the Wyrd are Force-using witches.

Now, if you're like Yara, you're probably saying, "Witch? Witch what? What witch? What in the world do you mean?" Well, Yara hasn't been able to come up with all the details, but the basics are something like this: For several generations, or longer, Tarasin who didn't fit in have drifted away from their homes and made their way deep into the forest. There, they studied the Force -- but not the light and fluffy Force, like the Jedi use. Oh, no! They study the dark Force, the part that little Sith wannabes study. These Tarasin, they're very angry -- we don't know about what, they just are -- and they want to hurt people.

They live in this jungle, somewhere deep inside, and they're more dangerous than any kilassin you're ever likely to meet.

Cut to Yara standing in front of an enormous tree, flanked on all sides by bushes. The words "Hypothetical Dramatic Situation" appear in big type at the bottom of the screen.

Now, friends, Yara is deep inside the jungles of Cularin. It's a scary place, isn't it? But there's only Yara here . . . right? The frightening thing about the Wyrd is that they can be anywhere. This bush, at Yara's left hand, could easily be the hiding place for a member of the Wyrd. Watch as I shake it, and you'll see what I mean.

All right, I'm shaking it now . . . I'm shaking it some more . . . Now I'm shaking it even *more*...

Yara frowns at the bush, which she clearly expected to be something other than a bush. As she's standing, frowning and shaking the bush, the bush behind her stands up, and a Tarasin's face appears between the thin, leafy branches. A pair of hands reaches out and grasps Yara by the shoulders, and she screams. The words "HYPOTHETICAL DRAMATIC SITUATION" begin to flash at the bottom of the screen.

You see, friends? Yara was looking at one bush, and another bush, containing a hidden Tarasin, stood up and attacked her. Thank you, Raouul. You can let go of me.

Now, that was just a dramatic creation of a scene that might or might not ever happen. But it could. The Wyrd have mastered the jungle like few other of its inhabitants, and if you aren't careful, they could catch you.

The scene around Yara changes, but she doesn't move. Clearly, this was all done in a studio. Raouul, the Tarasin wearing the bush costume, turns and walks off the set.

So you may be asking yourself, "Why is Yara talking to me about the Wyrd? Is she trying to make me nervous? Is she trying to incite panic? Is she trying to harm Cularin's burgeoning tourism industry?"

Of course not! First of all, Yara knows Cularin, and Yara knows that telling any of her viewers that something dangerous may be lurking in the jungles is, in fact, the best way to get you to go out there and do something about it. She also knows that telling you that she knows that telling you about something will get you to do it will probably convince you not to do it, because then you might feel as though you're being manipulated. Of course, if she knows that, then you might also conclude that you know she knows that, or that she knows that you know that she knows that, and that this might change what she's doing so that it's really not clear whether she wants you to go out and hunt down the Wyrd or not.

I think that was right.

Regardless, we all know a lot. So the question becomes, why is Yara telling you all this?

The answer is, because Cularin needs to know. Yara's not much for keeping secrets. Never has been! And Yara knows that some secrets are dangerous if

they get kept. Things like capital ships in the clouds of Genarius, secret Thaereian bases scattered throughout the system, or the Cartel working to undermine Cularin's economy. Yara's not saying that any of those statements are *true*, but if they were, wouldn't they all fall into the category of "Things the people of Cularin should know about?"

Yara thinks so, and she bets you do, too.

The Wyrds are dangerous. And probably the most dangerous of them is Liriana.

Yara talked to a Jedi friend of hers, and he said that Liriana's existence just proves the need, ultimately, for balance in the Force. Mother Dariana is a force for good and order, a kindly and loving old Tarasin who looks out for all the creatures of Cularin.

Then there's her sister, Liriana. Yara won't give you the full run-down on Liriana. Mother Dariana entered her sister's existence, and some of her motives, into public record recently, and Yara's not about to go back over the same things you've already seen or can pull out of the archives.

Yara's Jedi friend said that for either of these individuals to exist, the other had to exist, or the Force would end up out of balance. This struck Yara as strange, since there really can't be balance to the Force with so many Jedi in the galaxy and not very many bad Force-users -- aren't there only two Sith? When Yara pointed that out, her Jedi friend just mumbled something and changed the subject.

The reason we should all be concerned now is that the Wyrds are getting more active. There have been reports -- some of them pretty violent -- of attacks on Tarasin villages. Some reports even speak of something strange going on at Cloud Mountain, but Yara doesn't go near there ever since the whole rebellion thing a few years back. Too political at the time, and now . . . well, it's just history.

A montage of scenes from the past few years, news photos and holovid clips and celebrations and funerals, plays across the screen behind Yara's head. We see Cloud Mountain, the destruction of the first secret Cartel base on Cularin, ships blasting their way through the asteroid belt, and a long shot of an EMP burst on Tilnes. There is a radiation storm on Genarius, images from the near-destruction of Tolea Biqua, and a shot of the spire of the Sith fortress on Almas, clearly taken from a hovering shuttle that slowly circled the spire. There are

Jedi, politicians, pilots, soldiers, and children. As the montage goes on, a face appears in the background, first in outline, and then becoming clearer and clearer. It's an old Tarasin with angry eyes, and soon she is the only thing on the screen behind Yara.

Not every Tarasin is bad. Only a few. But beware those few, friends. Beware the Wyrd. This is Yara Grugara . . . Good night.

Cularin at Night

Cularin at night isn't what it used to be. Rumors abound about Thaereian thugs scouring the streets in the dead of night to round up malcontents and innocents alike -- folks who are rarely seen again.

*These streets were fair
And full of life;
These streets were kind
And made for dreams.
These streets are dark
And promise strife;
Cularin's moved
Beyond our means.*

-- Graffiti found on the outer wall of a warehouse in Gadrin

Old Ezil? Nope. Haven't seen him. The old man didn't ever do anything but sit over in the corner and talk bad about anyone and anything that came to the planet. He was worse than a Tarasin, most of the time. Thinking he knew everything that was going on, giving advice nobody wanted. People what had brains in their heads, they didn't even listen. But there's always a few, right?

Nah, you don't want to talk to me. I saw the old man, and I listened to him, but I never believed half of what he said. Besides, he mainly ever thought about what happened during the day. Oh, he thought he knew about pirates and smugglers and all sorts of bad things, but like most of the old-timers, when the suns went down, he hobbled off and fell into his bed, and then he missed most of the things he wanted to be talking about. No, I *don't* care that he said he knew what was going on at night. He slept through half the things what happened around Cularin, and the most important ones - the ones that would scare you stupid, leave you drooling like a Kowakian monkey-lizard on spice -

he never knew about at all. 'Cause they happened at night. That's the way of things.

Now, what's that all about? Flashing a credstick at me like you think it'll make a difference. Why should I talk to you about anything I don't know? Here, lemme see that credstick. Hmm . . . look, you aren't asking easy questions, and there aren't easy answers. I might know one or two things I could talk to you about, but you gotta know that there's stuff that nobody knows. I mean, old Ezil, he talked and talked like he knew what was what. He didn't, no more than I do. Not for sure, at least. But there's a few things I figured out, things I seen at night what would make you quiver.

See, now, you're lookin' at me like you think I'm gonna talk about those crazy Tarasin witches that the holo-bim talked about a few weeks back. Not even gonna happen. The scariest thing on Cularin's not Tarasin. Most of them are harmless. Just foolish types, not actually doing anything to hurt people. More scare than substance.

Nah, the main threat on the streets, the one what scares all us, is those folks from Thaere. Was easier when they stayed hid, didn't come out in the open, but these patrols . . . they say they got jurisdiction, right? But they aren't law around here. I got friends in OPS, and Thaere's people are ignoring OPS. Might as well be that OPS don't exist. That's how much Thaere listens to them. And now they got the right to do whatever they want? Since when? I watched that debate thing that the holo-bim ran, just like you did. Just like most people did, what cared about what's going on in Cularin. Sounded to me like Thaere had to follow local rules.

They aren't. Like I got to tell you that. What Thaere's been doing at night, though . . . I mean, parading around in their little uniforms with their big guns during the day is one thing. But at night, they keep the guns and ditch the uniforms.

Don't believe me? Then how about this: Tell me where Vad Kirn, Horis Byrla, Anistia Qu, and Rof Barrges have gone. Or old Ezil. Or any of a couple hundred others. This ain't like the time when Nim'Ri and Gerta and them took off for the hills. This is people being taken. And yeah, I guess we kind of thought it might be people being taken then, too, but we were wrong. Maybe we're wrong again.

Speaking of Nim'Ri, word is now that he's not here because he "headed home."

You find that funny? I sure do. Since my big lizardboy was born in Cularin. He didn't head back to wherever it is them Trandosians come from. He got took. You look like maybe you know something about that -- what's the word? Me, I figure that after everything he did for the system, he wouldn't leave just because things was getting rough. If anything, he'd hang around and make sure that they started getting better. But he wouldn't be leaving. So my guess is, he's dead, and if I had to lay blame, I'd put it on Thaere.

Anyway, back to Thaere and them being here and doing things at night. Some of what they do is arrests. I seen it myself. I almost got caught in one of their sweeps, about a week back. The thing is, they don't much care who they get. At least, not that night. Probably not any of the others, far as it goes. They just wanted to get somebody. Maybe they have targets other times, but that night they just walked down the street in these black uniforms -- you couldn't hardly see them at all -- and whenever they come to somebody who was in the street at night, they just went all stun-baton happy on the person's neck. Front of the neck, too. They laughed. Sounded to me like they was having a "twitch" contest. Shock someone, see how long they twitched after you took the shock off. They had this droid cart behind them, just coming along and scooping up the folks they knocked out. Every time the droid picked someone up, it'd say, "You are under arrest. You are being detained." Then it'd drop them into its back-end, usually head first.

Yeah, I know. Hard to believe, right? You ask the Thaereians about these nighttime sweeps, you know what they'd say? That they're taking care of the criminal element. Making everybody safe. Nobody's going to dispute them, I guess, since they think nobody's seen them do what they do, and anyone what says something is likely to be "detained" next time they do a sweep. For all I know, that could be tonight. Which is why it ain't good to talk about, and why I ain't saying nothing to no one who might repeat it. You ain't recording any of this, right? But that . . . that ain't even the worst of it.

See, the bone that Thaere's throwing to OPS, to keep them shut up, is that crime really is down. Guess if you "detain" enough people at night, then you're gonna get a lot of the rough-and-tumble types, the ones what might've been looking to cause trouble. They want folks to think that's their whole goal, but if that was their goal, how come there's other folks disappearing, too? I know folks who ain't around any more. Some of them, maybe they deserved to get detained. Some of them didn't do nothing, though. But because crime's down, even if OPS is kinda getting run over by Thaere, OPS isn't gonna do nothing

about it.

Besides, our "beloved" Senator says that Thaere's okay by her, and we should all be happy that they're willing to protect us. What I wanna know is, when's the next election? Let's get that cow out of office and put someone in who actually wants something good for Cularin. Just forget all those rumors about how she's some descendant of Reidi Artom -- no descendant of Reidi Artom would ever let this kind of thing happen in Cularin. You don't take a place that your great-grandmother found and named and brought the galaxy to, and then flush it. Wren's a politician. No better or worse than any of the rest of them.

Which is to say, she's pretty bad, if you ask me.

You keep looking at me crooked. Let me tell you . . . I don't like that. You look at me straight, or you just peddle your rump back out the door. You paid me to talk, you didn't pay me to put up with you thinking I don't know what I'm talking about. You don't like what I got to say? Fine. Leave. You already got your cred's worth.

Yeah. What I thought. So, we'll skip the political stuff. There's been a few times what people who had friends or family get detained went to OPS and asked what was up, and then they went to some Thaereian patrol and asked what was up. You do this, from what I hear, first thing what happens is you fill out form after form after form. OPS, used to be, would start looking for the missing person while you did a few forms, but not a whole load. Thaere, they don't look until every form is filed. Perfectly. They don't want to go out and do this stuff, you gotta understand. They don't care. Watch their faces when you want them to actually do something. They roll their eyes, they look away, they check the clock -- anything to keep them from dealing with you. Not good, you ask me. Not good.

But you fill out all those forms -- and this is true for every one of the people I've talked to who went and talked to the Thaereians about finding someone who'd gone missing -- and within 24 hours, you get a call. Case is unsolvable. Sorry, we can't help you. No clues on Cularin as to the whereabouts of your missing individual, and our branch is autonomous from all the other branches in the system. No, we won't coordinate a search. We're here to protect you, not to make search parties. People leave planets all the time. You want another base to do some searching, you go to that base and you fill out their forms. No, we can't transfer your forms to them, because their forms are

different. And so on, and so on.

In other words, they look just long enough to know that the person's not on the planet and then they stop looking. And you know how they know so fast that the person's not on Cularin? It ain't a sensor sweep. My friend Jex, he sat outside the Thaereian warehouse in Hedrett, near the groundport, and monitored their transmissions. Didn't listen in, just checked to see what kind of data was being sent. Nothing showed anything like a search. Just standard transmissions for the whole day. No particular effort made to find anyone, near as he could tell. But 24 hours after he finished the forms they commed him and said, "Your brother isn't here." How'd they know that if they didn't do anything? Huh?

Look, I gotta go. I talk too much, and I don't need more trouble'n I've already got. So you just leave, and I'll leave, and we can both walk careful. Cause there's bad things going on, and the worst of it's at night.

[The preceding was a transcription of a recorded voice-only conversation posted to the Cularin holonet by anonymous sources earlier this week. Thaere has not acknowledged any of the charges made, except to verify that yes, crime is down on Cularin.]

Conversations With Lanius

While it doesn't happen quite so often as we might like, we were recently invited back to the Almas academy to speak with Jedi Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk. This was, unlike other occasions, to be a fairly free-form interview. A great deal has gone on in Cularin since the last time we had a chance to speak with Master Lanius in an informal capacity.

While the informality remained, it soon became clear that Master Lanius is not quite so detached from the problems in Cularin as we might have been led to believe. He is, as always, a man of deep conviction who believes that in the end, it will take more than words to heal all that is wrong in Cularin.

Hello, Master Lanius. Thank you for having us.

My pleasure. I trust your journey was comfortable?

Very. I must admit, we were somewhat surprised that you accepted our invitation, with the criticism that has been leveled against the Jedi in Cularin recently.

Criticism? There's always criticism. We do too much, we do too little, we support the wrong people, we don't support anyone at all. Was there a particular bit of criticism you had in mind?

We were fairly surprised to see the clips of Yara Grugara criticizing the Cularin Jedi. They played over and over for quite some time, and we're certain you saw them.

At the memorial service? It was poorly timed, and ill-advised. Ms. Grugara has since apologized. There's more than enough discontent in the system without fostering more for the sake of ratings, and I believe she knows this.

So the Jedi accept her apology?

There's nothing to apologize for. Perhaps she made a mistake, but no one is expected to be perfect. If it is important that someone publicly say so, then yes, I will at least accept her apology. But I won't deign to speak for the remainder of the Order. I doubt that anyone harbors anger over her words, though; many said things they did not mean, then. It was a difficult time.

I'm glad to hear you say that, since Yara very much wanted to be here. Yara?

[A door slides open and Yara enters, wearing robes that appear to be patterned after traditional Jedi robes, but done in shades of violet. She approaches Lanius and shakes his hand, not seeming to notice his tired, tolerant half-smile.]

YG: Master Lanius - that's quite a mouthful, can I call you Lan?

LQB: If I said "No," would it stop you?

YG: Probably not. Look, it's wonderful to see you again. I'm so glad that you've accepted my apology on behalf of the Jedi. I really don't know what I was thinking at the time.

LQB: I can only speak for myself, Ms. Grugara. For me, no apology is necessary. And for me, I also don't know what you were thinking. For a time, I had begun

to wonder if someone had replaced you with a clone, or a particularly unctuous droid.

YG: No, that was all Yara.

LQB: Does Yara always speak of herself in the third person?

Is that a question for me?

LQB: Either of you. It's an odd speech pattern. It makes me wonder what, exactly, she has seen or done that makes her feel as though she's unworthy to speak of herself as something other than an external entity - a thing. I recently gave an interview about attachment and its perils, but now I find myself wondering about the perils of detachment. If one watches oneself on the holo vid too many times, does one begin to dissociate oneself from the identity one had previously established? Or is there something else?

YG: Is that a question for Yara?

LQB: No, whether you always speak of yourself in the third person was a question for you.

YG: No.

I believe that's the shortest sentence I've ever heard Yara utter. Master Lanius, how are things here at the Academy? How goes the search for the new faculty member?

YG: Do you plan on fighting the Sith any time soon?

[Lanius looks from one of his interviewers to the other. His eyes betray that he is unsure which question to answer first.]

LQB: Even with a war going on, it's easier to find Jedi to fill roles in the Academy than it is to find Sith. There are, after all, only two of them.

YG: Couldn't that just be a convenient fiction, put forth by the surviving Sith to lessen the likelihood that any single one of them might be identified as such, or if one were to be identified, then that might leave the mass numbers of Sith who actually roam the galaxy free of attempts to capture or kill them for a decade or two? A lot of us have heard of this "rule of two" - but if the Sith are all liars, why should we believe that they would follow their own rule?

LQB: We have no particular reason to believe them, but we would have less if we'd heard it from their own lips. It makes a certain degree of sense. The dark side is greedy and jealous, and it inspires those who follow it to kill their fellows in order to gain and maintain power. The "rule of two" is a necessity for an order such as theirs to survive. It has been the case throughout recorded history that particularly powerful maleficent forces had trouble working together, and would generally, left to their own devices, kill one another off.

YG: So it could all be a lie?

LQB: Of course.

So, before Yara gets to it, what is your opinion of the situation with Thaere? Many of us heard Minos Fel'Kona speak a few weeks ago on what appeared to be the "official" stance of the Jedi. Would his statements translate directly to Jedi policy?

LQB: There is no policy. There is the Force. [He chuckles.]

YG: Jedi humor. Cute. What about Thaere?

LQB: What about them?

If I may? What about their increasingly violent and disturbing behavior toward the people of Cularin? What about their open flaunting of their protective charter? What about the fact that they are claiming rights and privileges that they should never have had to begin with?

LQB: You're being obtuse. What is it that's bothering you? [He pauses.] You seem to want me to denounce Thaere. I cannot do that. Thaere was appointed protector of Cularin by the Senate, and until such time as the Senate removes Thaere from its position, the Jedi are bound to serve the Senate's will.

YG: So you really are powerless? Um, I mean, you probably aren't powerless, as such, but you aren't going to do anything about the problem?

LQB: What problem? No, don't look so shocked. The evidence has been shoddy at best. Thaere has had reasons and paperwork to back up every questionable thing they've done, and for the things that they haven't done, they've retained plausible deniability. There is nothing to act on, even if there were enough Jedi here to act -- which there aren't.

So if you don't believe Thaere presents any threat to Cularin -

LQB: I don't recall having said that. I've said there is no evidence, and without evidence there can be no "problem."

YG: But you believe them to be a threat?

LQB: I don't recall having said that, either. I don't believe I've made a statement as to whether or not Thaere represents a threat to Cularin.

YG: Do you?

LQB: Do I what?

YG: Intend to make a statement.

LQB: I'm sure I'll make a great many statements in my lifetime. That was one, right there. And that was another. Ms. Grugara, while you seem to have come a long way as a journalist, you do have a tendency to push too hard and listen for the answers that will be most useful, instead of the answers that are actually given.

YG: Huh?

LQB: Why are you a journalist?

I don't believe this interview is supposed to be about Yara.

LQB: Ms. Grugara?

YG: No, that's fine. I want to be a journalist so I can help people. I mean, that's not why I wanted to be a journalist to start with. I wanted to travel and see the galaxy, and I did, and now it kind of seems like I wasn't doing anything important. And we all need to feel like we're important, right?

LQB: Is it not enough to just be who you are?

YG: Um, hello? The rest of the protectors of the galaxy are waving to you from the temple on Coruscant. Jedi are inherently important, because of all the Force doo-dads you can do.

LQB: "Force doo-dads"?

YG: Face it, Lan. You and the Jedi have lots more power than the rest of us, and it's hard to be "normal" in the galaxy. Maybe you never had to try and find something that was special about you because you were always a Jedi, and that's special enough. But some of us have had to work every day to try and find meaning, and . . .

[Yara's face is bright red. She avoids looking in the direction of the holo-recording equipment.]

Well, that's interesting. Master Lanius, would you care to comment on Count Dooku's role in the Separatist organization?

LQB: No, actually. I'd rather respond to Ms. Grugara, if that's all right with you.

If it's not, you could just wave your hand and make it all right with me.

LQB: But I wouldn't. Because being sensitive to the Force and using the Force for mundane tasks are very different. There's a widespread perception about Jedi that we are as different from other living creatures as banthas are from droids. That's simply not the case. Every person in the galaxy, every living thing, is part of the living Force. It is an essential part of each of us, and it just happens that Jedi, and a few others, are able to feel the Force and to use - and be used by - it. Jedi also search for meaning, just as Ms. Grugara has described from her own experiences. Being a Jedi is not an end-state. I know Jedi who, when they were young, wanted nothing so much as to be Jedi Knights. They made it, then found that they still had to find things to strive for. If you achieve a goal - whether it's being a Jedi or being a journalist - and then do nothing after, you are wasting your life. Jedi are not static. We do not sit around, once we create our lightsabers and don our robes, to wait for the galaxy to treat us with respect. We also seek out meaning, and while our search may be different than Ms. Grugara's - we seek to understand the will of the Force, while she seeks to help people - there is also not nearly so much difference as we might initially suspect. Because the will of the Force may be that Ms. Grugara helps people.

I can't say that I blame her for her frustration. The Jedi have always seemed remote and aloof to the populace. There were few enough of us before the war broke out that when one or two of us appeared on a planet, we were newsworthy. But we remain who we are. Each of us - Jedi and non-Jedi - can only be one person, and part of being that person is the search for our unique identity. So if you find yourself through the act of communicating and helping

others, I would say that at worst you are no worse off than any Jedi I have ever met, and you are likely better off than a sizeable number of us.

That was quite a speech, Master Lanius. Is it wise, do you think, to admit to frailty in this time of crisis?

LQB: It's not frailty. We would shatter much more easily if we believed ourselves invincible, and, if we presented ourselves as invincible, it would galvanize our enemies all the more when a Jedi fell.

Yara, you look like you have something to say.

YG: Lan, are you allowed to date?

LQB: Excuse me?

And on that note, I believe we should end our conversation. I'd like to thank Master Lanius and Yara Grugara for being with us. Until next time . . .

Thaere Is Not Your Friend

Tensions have risen regarding Thaere's military presence in Cularin. One night last week, a message appeared everywhere: "Thaere Is Not Your Friend." Since then, the letters TINYF have popped up on buttons, shirts, and stickers. Now, "Eye on Cularin" investigates the growing accusations.

Tensions have risen in recent months regarding the continued presence of Thaere's military in Cularin. One night last week, a message appeared -- painted on walls, scrawled on tables, chiseled into sidewalks -- in several hundred places throughout the Cularin system. From restaurants in Gadrin and Hedrett to bars on Tolea Biqua to shelters on Almas, the same five words appeared: "Thaere Is Not Your Friend." No single group has claimed responsibility, and while Thaereian forces supervised the removal of all the offending graffiti within a matter of hours, the message was clear. Someone -- a large number of someones -- views Thaere as an increasing problem.

While the full-fledged graffiti has not reappeared, the letters TINYF have popped up with surprising (or, for Thaereians, alarming) frequency. A few brave individuals have even ventured out into public wearing TINYF buttons and shirts, and TINYF stickers have found their way onto numerous doors, windows,

and other places such a message might be noticed.

The displeasure of the Thaereian forces is plain to see, but they do not seem, at this point, to have done much about it. People are interested, though, and it has fallen to Cularin's newsnets to begin probing the issue in more depth.

Hello. This is Ryk Osentay, reporting for "Eye on Cularin." It's impossible to live in Cularin this week and not have seen the tiny-F, as it's come to be called -- the five letters T-I-N-Y-F that have shown up almost everywhere. Their ubiquity is disturbing many, since it is unclear where the various stickers, buttons, shirts, holograms, cookies, bootlaces, and monogrammed holsters have come from. Such items do not appear out of thin air, after all; they must be manufactured. But where? And by whom? These are questions that many citizens of Cularin are asking themselves.

If I had to guess, though, I'd say that the citizens are much less concerned about where the letters come from than about our protectors from Thaere. The letters, after all, are shorthand for a message that came through very clearly to Cularin last week: "Thaere is not your friend." But why? What does the message mean? Is there something that we ought to be doing differently? Could something allow us to see the truth behind Thaere's actions -- if there is some truth other than what they claim, of course, which this reporter would never, ever suggest? What is it that we're supposed to be gleaning from the message?

To answer this question, "Eye on Cularin" conducted a series of interviews with citizens of our system. While our survey may not be quite so broad as that conducted by our missing colleague, Melanda Forswoth, we hope to sample a meaningful cross-section of Cularin's citizenry.

A picture of missing "Eye on Cularin" reporter Melanda Forswoth appears on the screen, with information regarding her disappearance and a number to contact if the viewer has any information. It disappears and Ryk is seated at a table in a darkened room. A shadowy figure sits across from him.

Ryk: Welcome back. I'm here with an individual who has requested anonymity. He -- or she, since we can make him or her sound like whatever we want -- claims to have information about Thaere that might help to explain what we've seen this past week. Guest?

Guest: Yes. I know much. You know little. Nerf-herding follower of bantha

tracks. Shaggy beast of wampalike intellect.

Ryk: Um . . .

Guest: You do not know. I know.

Ryk: Well, no. That's why you're here. So we can talk about what you know.

Guest: Fool! I am evil overlord! You bow down to me!

He stands, shoving back his chair, and pulls a half-meter wooden rod from one leg of his pants.

Guest: Fear my lightsaber!

Ryk: Um . . . That's a stick.

Guest: Die, coward scum of not-Sith!

He tries to toss the table aside and finds it too heavy. He shoves at it. It moves a few centimeters. He curses -- everything but "poodoo" gets censored -- and trudges around the table, stick in hand.

Ryk: Guards? Hello, guards?

A stun blast comes from off-camera. The shadowy man with the stick falls unconscious. We fade out. When the picture returns, Ryk doesn't seem to have moved, but someone different sits across from him.

Ryk: We're back. Security has detained the previous guest, who apparently didn't have all that much to tell us anyway. Our next interviewee will hopefully shed a little more light on the situation. And --

He looks off-camera.

Ryk: And I've been told that this one isn't carrying any large sticks with which to attack me. Welcome, guest.

The dark form across from him nods. This individual looks to be smaller than the last, but the shadows seem to layer over his -- or her -- face and shoulders. Nothing at all is clear.

Ryk: I understand that you work in electronic surveillance. Is that the case?

Guest 2 (voice masked to sound exactly like Ryk's): It is.

Ryk: You have some small amount of talent, then? But more importantly, I think our viewers will want to hear about your connections. I've been told that you have information from someone deep within the slicer underworld about certain fund transfers. Can you tell us how you came by this information?

Guest 2: By being smarter than you.

Ryk: Of course. More specifically?

Guest 2: Largely genetic, I assure you.

Ryk: This is going nowhere. Let's bring on the next --

Guest 2: You want to know about the InterGalactic Banking Clan's ties to Thaere, don't you? No one else is going to give you the information I have.

Ryk leans forward, elbows on the table that separates him from the guest.

Ryk: That's very much what we want to know about. Given that the InterGalactic Banking Clan is a known financial supporter of the Separatist movement, what can you tell me about them and their link to Thaere?

Guest 2: Oh, not much. Just a little matter of a transfer of 200 million credits from IBC accounts to the Thaereian Navy over the last six months.

Ryk consults a datapad.

Ryk: 200 million? I wasn't told that.

Guest 2: No, you weren't. If I'd given your producer the real figure, I'd be in Thaereian hands by now. Two hundred million fills a lot more pockets than just those of the fighter jockeys, let me tell you.

Ryk: You're saying our producer has been paid off by Thaere?

Guest 2: Maybe. I'm saying there aren't many people who couldn't be reached for that price. A little here, a little there . . . idiots in this system will take money from anyone. You know what's funny? You transfer credits from the

right kind of account to another account, and that opens up the receiving account *forever*. Take money from the wrong people at the wrong time, and those people can get at your goods for as long as you've got 'em. It's not every account, but one of the big corporate accounts? They do enough transfers and the system set up by the IBC is configurable enough that if they use the right code, they have permanent access to everything a receiver ever does with their money. So getting paid a little by the wrong people can make you vulnerable as long as you're using the same account structure.

Ryk: That sounds ominous. Are you saying Thaere has done that?

Guest 2: No . . .

Ryk: Let's go back to our producers having been paid off, shall we?

Guest 2: If we're still broadcasting, then either they haven't been paid off, or they think the best way to hide the fact that they *have* is to do nothing. I don't care about your producers. I'm already talking, so they can't do anything to stop me right now. I gave them lower figures and only hinted at how much Thaere got from the IBC. Not enough to make them call in the hounds.

Ryk: Why? Why is Thaere getting so many credits from the IBC?

Guest 2: I'm smarter than you, Ryk, but you aren't *that* dumb. Thaere isn't loyal to the Republic. They're working with the Separatists. For all we know, they have been all along.

Ryk: "We"?

Guest 2: They practically have control of Cularin, and we have one of the biggest Jedi training facilities in the galaxy outside of Coruscant. If the Separatists can take control of Cularin, it may shift the balance of power. So far, Cularin hasn't been called on to assist in the Clone Wars. That doesn't mean we won't.

Ryk: Does this mean Senator Wren is a traitor?

Guest 2: We don't think so. She's being manipulated, like everyone else.

Ryk: Who is the "we" you keep mentioning?

Before the guest can answer, the lights in the room come on. Every shadow

disappears, and the masking of the guest's face and voice shut down. The guest is none other than Gerta Haman, the Human woman who led Cularin's resistance against the Metatheran Cartel and was feared by some to be dead. [The heroes would have encountered Gerta in the original "Eye of the Sun" trilogy, the first three Living Force events.]

Armed guards wearing Thaereian uniforms rush into the room and slam Gerta to the table. Her eyes are wide and fearful as her hands are bound behind her back. The guards jerk her to her feet.

Gerta: Thaere is not your friend, Cularin! Not your --

Four guards reach in at once and bash Gerta's face with stun batons, much more forcefully than stun batons need to be used. She slumps forward, unconscious, and is dragged out of the room. The scene fades. The next image is of Ryk, seated beside Yara Grugara at the "Eye on Cularin" news desk.

Ryk (having difficulty speaking): It hardly feels like that was only yesterday, Yara.

She pats his arm. He nods in appreciation and takes a deep breath.

Ryk: This morning, the Thaereian ship transporting Gerta Haman to Coruscant, where she was scheduled to meet with Senator Wren to discuss the allegations made on this program at the request of the Senator, was attacked. Haman and fourteen members of the Thaereian Navy were on board. Jedi Knight Ish-Bel Tur served as guardian of the mission and liaison from the Almas Academy. Three minutes after the initial distress call, the ship exploded at the edge of Thaereian space. There were no survivors. The Thaereian government has offered a sizable reward...

Who Is Baylan?

A number of slicers have gained a twisted sort of prominence over the years. Reviled by authority and revered by disenfranchised youths, slicers are a community unto themselves. They have their own rules and their own codes of conduct, and the hierarchy that emerges among slicers is based not on personality, but on skill and respect for skill.

In Cularin and other systems away from the Core, one particular slicer -- Baylan -- has made quite a name for himself. Baylan takes jobs that interest him. If there's a way to circumvent or undermine authority, he tackles projects with an almost childlike glee. If a project doesn't involve undermining authority, he finds a way to make it do so. Every piece of code he's ever created has at least three "back doors" he can use to access it, somewhere down the line, in order to sow chaos.

While his motivations remain unclear, it has become apparent from his actions that Baylan has little interest in hurting anyone. Instead, he seeks to tear down the structures that sacrifice individual achievement in favor of corporate or governmental success. A fervent believer in the doctrine that individuals of all species should have the chance to make unique contributions to the greater good, Baylan works to put people in control of their own destinies. He seeks to free them from what he sees as "the oppression of the many by the few"¹.

Who he is and what he looks like remain mysteries. Baylan has no interest in what limited celebrity he has been granted, content to live -- safe and secure -- as far from watchful eyes as he can get.

The following are quotations archived on the Holonet that are attributed to Baylan. Whether or not he actually said them remains a mystery, though there is a certain consistency to the writing style. The philosophy espoused seems to correspond to his behavior very well.

MSG 10771-223A

If government is such a good idea, why does everyone have a different idea of what's good? Listen to the politicians some time. Really listen to them. Count how many words come out of their mouths between meaningful thoughts. Boil down their ideas to their basic elements and see if there are any elements left. The fact is, the people that governments serve don't have a single blasted thing to do with the governments. You aren't being served; you're serving.

MSG 1229181-7

I was on Coruscant recently. It doesn't matter why. One of the things I did was take a tour of the area around the Jedi Temple. You see it in the holovids and you think it's going to be impressive. And in some ways, I guess it is. But in others, it's just a building. The people who live and work there are just like us. They're people. They live. They go to work. Maybe they think about their jobs differently than you or I do. Maybe they don't. I bet Jedi have good days and

bad days. You see their temple and think, "This is where the people who are supposed to protect the galaxy live? This is it?" It looks too small to protect the galaxy. Pack it so full of bodies that every person inside liquefies and you still don't have enough room for all the protectors we need. Things are a mess. If we count on the Jedi to save us, we're all going to die.

MSG 23197656.A2

The Senate is full of bloated, self-important bureaucrats who couldn't find their own planets from orbit. They care more about their pensions than they do about their people. If there was one thing the Separatists got right -- and that's a big "if"-- it was leaving the Senate behind. Of course, politicians are creatures of habit, so they'll probably just end up creating a new Senate that they will call something else. Or maybe they'll just call it the Senate, and pretend that they're the only ones. The self-delusional abilities of politicians never cease to amaze me.

MSG 963148.ZwwZ

So, last week I was tearing down the communications infrastructure for DeSKo, and I realized something, although it took me a while to figure out what it was. Nutshell: No matter how many corps get torn down, no matter how many times I take credits from some rich Twi'lek's accounts and disburse it to random accounts, the rich people will get rich again. I'm not sure why I bother. Why doesn't someone DO SOMETHING with the credits that suddenly end up in their accounts? So I monitored what your average Human does when an extra thousand credits shows up in his account. Know what he does? Nothing. He sits and hopes no one notices. Five-thousand? Ten? Same. There are a few you can do that to who'll cancel the account and transfer all the funds somewhere they think is safe. But that's NOT THE POINT. The point is, you have to give people the chance to do something. I don't make lives. I give people a start to making their own life. The average person is so WHIPPED by the establishment that he can't even think about making his own life better. It's sad. I'm not going to quit, though. If the rich get richer while I'm stealing from them, they'd own the bloody galaxy if I didn't.

MSG 882A995

If you whine long enough, someone will eventually hear you. If you keep whining after you're heard, someone will eventually shoot you.

MSG 119192920518.0

There are no dumb questions. No, check that. "How do you become a slicer?"

That's a dumb question. Last time I got that, I told the joker who asked that I had a special test that I'd made up, and that if he wanted to be a slicer, he had to pass it. So now he's on year five of his sentence. I think by this point he's probably figured out that he's not a slicer.

MSG 8712.A19

The level of control necessary to maintain safety and prosperity in a society is inversely proportional to the level of technology in that society. In low-tech societies, every person is immediately interdependent with every other person. If Baylan doesn't kill a rancor this afternoon, Baylan's family doesn't eat tonight. It therefore is everyone's best interests that Baylan haul his sorry carcass out of bed, pull on his boots, grab his spear, and go hunt the rancor. The more technology you get, the less people have to rely on each other and the less oversight there needs to be of any individual. Watch the machines. Design them well enough, and you don't need to pay attention to the people so much. Trust that the thought-work can be done by the people, and the machines will do the hunter-gatherer flop that people never have seemed all that wild about to start. If you want proof that I'm right, just look at our society. Lots of technology -- lightspeed communication -- and yet there are more controls on us than ever. That's not right.

MSG 16622.XHT

Brilliance cannot exist in groups. It exists only in individuals. Put a brilliant person in a group, and that person is dulled. He must slow himself down to the level of the peons he's forced to endure. I don't claim to be the most brilliant person to ever live. Not out loud, at least. But I've been a lot of places and seen a lot of things, and I know for a fact that every time I've tried to work with someone else, I've gotten dragged down. It's probably the case that there's someone out there who I'd drag down, if I worked with her. I just haven't met her (or him, I guess), yet. But that's the nature of things. Unless everyone in a group is exactly the same, the fools of the group will come out looking not so foolish, and the geniuses will come out looking like fools.

¹Taken from a rare public posting in a Holonet forum, this quote is part of a larger rant Baylan presented at the onset of the Clone Wars. Baylan views the wars as simply another in a series of conflicts designed to make governments more necessary and individual lives less important, and he does not side with either the Loyalist or the Separatist camp.

Trammel's Move

Sure, maybe street-smart Blackie doesn't wash much, and maybe he's keen on guns and knives, and maybe he babbles crazy theories all day, but he's got something to say about Rufus Trammel. It seems Trammel's leaving Cularin. Who might fill his shoes?

Questions. S'always questions, and not lotsa answers. See, people don't come around here much. Don't get me wrong; we get our share of the adventure-seeking do-gooder types. Some of them -- some of youse, I guess -- like to prowl places like this, looking around for trouble they can stop. Thing is, what you look at to be trouble, we just see as how life goes. What your kind sees as things what need fixing, my kind sees as another day, another kilocred.

S'all about how you look at the world. Worlds, I guess. I never lived nowhere else but right here on Tolea Biqua, so it don't much matter to me that there's other worlds out there. I mean, I travel, but when you got ships like we got ships in Cularin, traveling is just stepping into a big box in one place and stepping out of that big box somewheres else. Sure, you got a pilot telling you that you're on a different city, or a different planet, or maybe he's saying you're in Coruscant or whatnot -- but how do you know? Man, I tell you what: If all you ever got to judge whether you really gone one place or another is some pilot who don't know the pointy end of a blaster, how d'you know you aren't just sitting in some chair somewhere with a big mask on your face while someone plays holovids for you all day?

Hey. It's a theory. Just ask, I got millions of 'em.

Name's Blackie. I'm kind of one of the folks people like you don't look at much. I don't go in much for grooming. Not a huge fan of showers. Kinda dig on having big guns that I sleep with, and big knives that I stick in my boots, and if I ever find me a thermal detonator, I'll probably put it in a display case just so's people know I have it. I had a friend once, blew up a guy with a thermal detonator. Accident, even. So everyone assumes, "Valdo's got a line on TDs," and they went and caught him after he'd been through a scan where they knew he didn't have no explosives on him and they blasted him until he weren't nothing but char. Ironical thing is, that was the only detonator Valdo ever had. Killed one guy with it, not even someone he particularly wanted to kill, and it got him put on about forty different hit lists. I figure, having one isn't such a bad thing, since then everybody who thinks about messing with you's got to think, "Is Blackie gonna use the detonator on me or my family?" But

using it, actually making yourself a threat -- that's something that I ain't too wild about.

You watch the way folks move when they're outside the law, you see this a lot. Some types use real pain and real hurting to get things done. Old Riboga, he was like that. Or she. You always hear people talk about Riboga as a "him," but I ain't so sure. You hear stories, sometimes.

I digress. So there's some what use real pain and real violence, and others who just talk like they're going to hurt folks until someone gets hurt first. This is more Nirama's style, though he'd probably kill me for saying it, since if I make him sound weak, then that may get some of his people killed, and he'll have to go and kill me to show that he's not weak, even though he wouldn't have killed me if I hadn't shot my mouth off. Unless you do something to hurt some folks, they stay out of the way and do their own thing.

I ain't figured out Trammel. Old Rufus, he's been here a while now. Going on two years, I guess. He came in and there was all this hoopla and worries about whether he'd be trying to take control of the system from Nirama. Turned out to be just that. Hoopla and worries. Didn't never worry Nirama, near as any of us could tell. There was some skirmishing, but never a war like some folks thought. Nirama, he had better things to do with his people, and Trammel -- well, we never have figured out what he's up to. I heard word that he's got a boss from outside the system what may be coming this way -- Chevin by the name of Phylus Mon. Tell you what: Mon shows up, I'm moving. I don't care what all it takes, Mon's nothing but bad news. Trammel, he moves exotics like nobody's business. Mon's a slaver, pure and simple, and if he shows his face around here, you can bet that Nirama's going to open up with about 40,000 turbolasers right on that crusty Chevin snout.

I dunno. Any luck at all and Mon stays away, then we don't have to worry about that kind of political warfare foolishness.

Trammel's people have been more of a problem than the man himself. Folks don't even know if he was in Cularin when the Blink happened, or if he was somewhere else and is ten years older and being wheeled everywhere he goes. He never was much for public appearances. Kinda like Nirama in that, I guess. Neither of them thinks much to go out in public when there's plenty of folks who might like to do 'em harm. Right or wrong, that's how people feel.

Me, I'm not big on taking down crime lords. There's enough little guys like me

running around and getting killed to make other folks rich that I don't much see the point to it. The skirmishes we had weren't even because Trammel or Nirama wanted them -- at least, that's word on the street. Just folks who ran into each other and saw that they were different, so they started in with killing.

See, I don't get that. It's one thing to be dumb 'cause you're ordered to be dumb. But being dumb just because someone else might like it if you were dumb, and then getting dead because you wanted to be dumb for someone else?

Galaxy's probably a better place without that type anyway. Just hope they didn't spawn before they got dumb and dead. My luck? They probably did. I can't even get a date, and the mental invalids who start fights that get them killed spawn left and right.

I got a theory that there's this inverse link between street smarts and spawning. See, folks who got no street smarts end up in one of two places. They either end up in big offices where they don't have to be streetwise, or they end up dead in a gutter. Now, those two kinds, they spawn lots. Kinda depressing, how much. So you get little street-morons running all over the place. The folks who're really street-smart, though, we don't spawn a whole lot. We got other things we need to do. Surviving on the streets, for one. That's the main one.

Like I said. It's a theory. I ain't worked out all the details just yet.

So anyway, Trammel. He stays under folks' radar, but I dunno if that means he ain't done much. He's not -- what's the word? "Inconspicuous"? I think that's it -- in the same way Nirama is. Trammel, you hear about, and he's always got something going on. Right now, things are getting strange.

See, Trammel's packing up. That's what I hear, at least. I dunno if it's because Mon may be coming (the Chevin makes Trammel look like a major lightweight; Hutts give Mon a pretty big berth), or something else. Sith knows, there's lots of problems around Cularin, and even with all the exotics and weird things we've got to export that he could be stealing, there's only so much risk the man can take. Whatever he was trying to do to Nirama don't look like it worked, so I can't say I'm too surprised he's up and going. But you'd think he'd make a big deal out of it, like he did when he came here.

He ain't, though. It's real quiet. I had to go and check on it a second time, just to be sure I heard right. Second source said yes, so I went to a third. Took some digging each time, but all the answers came back the same.

The thing with power like Trammel brought and like Nirama has is there's only so much to go around. It's like you got Cularin, and all the power in Cularin's a pie. So when there's just Nirama around, he's got a big sloppy piece of pie that's dribbling juice all over everything. Then Trammel comes, and Nirama's mad 'cause his pie's getting smaller, and there ain't so much juice to dribble, and maybe Trammel takes some of the good bits of crust -- but there's still pie there, and they both got pieces.

See, though, when people leave who got power, they take pie with them. So there's a gap where some of the pie used to be. And maybe Nirama takes it back, or maybe someone else does.

I dunno. I guess all I'm saying is this: If Trammel's really leaving, then something's gotta happen in Cularin. Or maybe it already has. But you mark me good. Change ain't never a happy thing.

False Horizon

The citizens of Cularin have become increasingly aware over the past year and a half of the presence of the Cularin Militia. This ever-growing body, under the leadership of Osten Dal'Nay and Broof Yurdel, has received funding from anonymous sources, has managed to procure ships, uniforms, weapons, and personnel, and has become a meaningful social and political force in Cularin – all without official government sanction.

Recently, the Militia grew quiet. It didn't disappear, but merely receded into the background. To all appearances, funding had been cut, or the Militia had been the victim of some sort of plot to keep it from operating at its fullest potential. Earlier this morning, however, the truth behind the Militia's inactivity was revealed. Commanders Dal'Nay and Yurdel appeared together in a holo-transmission viewed across the system. In this transmission, they revealed that what might have been taken for quiescence had, in fact, been planning -- planning for a most amazing event.

The screen flickers. Two faces come into focus, then we pull back and see two individuals standing at the edge of one of Cularin's jungles. One of the

individuals is a Human male, the other a Gungan male. Both wear the distinctive livery of the Cularin Militia. After a few seconds, the names "Osten Dal'Nay" and "Broof Yurdel" appear below the appropriate individual. In the distance, we hear blaster fire.

Osten: People of Cularin, the time for action is at hand. One hour ago, Militia strike teams seized control of Thaereian bases throughout Cularin.

Broof: Wesa still doin' da fightin'. Mya ground troops, deysa takin' losses, but wesa pushin' da bombad Daereians out of Cularin, or wesa dyin' in da tryin'.

Osten: Ship-to-ship engagement has been minimal. Thaereian transports have been seized, and a number of fighter bases have been neutralized. So far, we have no confirmed civilian casualties, though we do not expect to continue to be so lucky. Any Militia member who has not so far taken part in these raids should consider him- or herself activated as of this moment. Please report to the nearest Militia station for briefing and equipping.

Evidence recently surfaced that Thaere has been plotting against Cularin and has been moving to control traffic into and out of Cularin for some time. It remains unclear to what extent they have succeeded, but there can be little doubt -- they are working with the Separatists and are cutting Cularin off from the remainder of the galaxy as thoroughly as possible. We could not wait any longer to launch Operation False Horizon.

More explosions in the background.

Broof: Wesa askin' all da peoples of Cularin -- don't be helpin' bombad Daere. Protectin' da families and keepin' Cularin safe, helpin' da Militia, dat'sa good. Mesa dink, wesa needin' help from alla da peoples of Cularin b'fore dis bein' done.

Both Osten and Broof nod off-camera, and the image fades. It's replaced by Yara Grugara, seated at the "Eye on Cularin" news desk. She is only partially made up and looks very grim.

Yara: Am I on?

Friends, this is Yara Grugara. As some of us have feared, it appears that the military of Thaere did not, in fact, have Cularin's best interests at heart. The strike by the Cularin Militia -- what sources are calling Operation False Horizon

-- was launched shortly after dawn, Cularin local time. Initial reports are sketchy, but we can gather this much: Thaereian bases around the system have been seized or put under siege. Most of the Thaereian troops on Cularin proper have withdrawn into Soboll, where it appears they have established a perimeter that includes layered security, multiple levels of shielding, and substantial personnel resources.

I've been told that we have a transmission coming in, a brief statement from the Master of the Jedi Academy on Almas, Lanius Qel-Bertuk. We take you now to that statement.

Master Lanius appears. He has dark circles under his eyes and looks determined.

Lanius: The actions of the Cularin Militia were undertaken with the full knowledge and consent of the Jedi on Almas. It has become clear to us that Thaere represents a threat to the well-being of the system. I will not speculate on the extent to which a relationship may exist between Thaere and the Believers, though others may. Instead, let me be blunt.

The reason the Jedi support this endeavor is that yesterday, attempts to contact Coruscant were blocked. We had known our communications with the Jedi Council were being monitored for some time, and we had narrowed our search for those responsible to a handful of locations. The full disruption of communication, however, left no doubt as to the likely next step.

Having been apprised of the Militia's activities over recent months by Commander Dal'Nay, we contacted him and encouraged him to move forward. It was with the heaviest of hearts that I did this. I, as with most Jedi, would not bring war to a place that had thus far been spared its tragedies. Until Thaere behaved in a manner that allowed no question of its intentions, I could not bring myself to support a course of action that would lead to the deaths of innocents. It may be that I waited too long, or not long enough. I will say only that I followed my best judgment. This is all any of us can do.

When the initial surge is over and the fronts where combat will take place are established, Jedi from Almas will be among those who fight for Cularin. Some of our number are already with the Militia members seeking to secure Thaereian bases in the system.

We will do all we can to see that peace is restored to Cularin. On that, you have my word. May the Force be with us all.

Lanius fades, and we again see Yara seated behind the news desk. She is now closer to three-quarters made up, and someone has applied enough makeup around her eyes to get rid of the dark circles. She shooshes someone off-camera.

Yara: While Master Lanius was speaking, three executives with Cularin Central Broadcasting were taken into custody under suspicion of conspiracy. Yara might be tempted, if she were less professional than she is, to note that these three individuals -- who will remain nameless, for the time being --

Three names scroll across the bottom of the screen.

-- are the same individuals who forced her to retract her statements last year about the capitol ships hidden in Genarius, and who encouraged her to stir up trouble at recent rallies. So, while formal charges have yet to be filed, the three nameless executives with Cularin Central Broadcasting --

The three names scroll across the bottom of the screen again, along with home addresses and comlink numbers.

-- are, in the opinion of some in our offices, likely to have questionable associations and ties to the Thaereian power structure.

The three names scroll across the screen one final time, followed by the words, "Treason is unacceptable and should be dealt with in the most thorough manner possible."

I've just been informed that our offices have received a holorecording of Senator Wren, delivered by a member of the Cularin Militia. Our producers are currently -- yes? I'm being told that the recording has been reviewed, and that it's going to air as soon as --

Yara and the Cularin Central Broadcasting set disappear. We see Senator Lavina Wren seated at a desk. The wall behind her is a flickering holographic image of the Galactic Senate chamber, complete with floating platforms that move back and forth from positions on the walls. Senator Wren is impeccably attired and looks every bit the professional politician. She folds her hands, takes a deep breath, and begins.

Senator Wren: Citizens of Cularin. When you elected me to represent you in the Galactic Senate, little could prepare me for what lay ahead. I've done my best to pilot our little ship through dangerous sectors, watching as the galaxy appeared to crumble around us. I lost you all, for a time. Then you came back to me, and the galaxy was a very different place than what you knew.

If you are viewing this recording, then I am on Coruscant, and you are at war. Know that I will do everything in my power to assist in bringing this war to a swift end. Know also that I cannot be certain how far my power extends. War may have come to Cularin, but Cularin is in a unique position to defend itself, and the Clone Wars are being fought on hundreds of fronts.

I have long suspected that the Thaereians worked with the Separatists, but for reasons I cannot detail to you, I could do nothing about it. Please believe me when I say that if I had believed I could do anything to stop them, I would have. It has only been in recent weeks that my hands have become (at last) unbound, and I have worked closely with the Militia in that time to put into place the necessary elements for Cularin to defend herself.

We are one small ship in a wide galaxy, and our problems are neither more nor less important, in the eyes of the Senate, than those of dozens of other ships that also find themselves adrift during this difficult time. I will not lie to you and claim that we should expect clone armies to make their way to Cularin in our defense. The presence of a Jedi academy and a growing militia makes it difficult to request troops when so many systems lack even a single Jedi or any kind of organized military. Still, I will not cease trying. I could no more stop trying to protect my home, my beloved Cularin, than any of you.

The fight will not be easy. Many will die, on both sides. Thaere is governed by cruel leaders who care nothing for the individual and everything for their own well-being. They have so far spared no expense to sow chaos and fear, and I do not expect them to suddenly become kind and benevolent. The apparent kindness, the feigned benevolence -- it has all been a smokescreen from the beginning, and the sooner they are beaten back and Cularin's independence restored, the better for all of us. We have not been free -- truly free -- since Cularin became a protectorate of Thaere, itself a puppet for the Separatist movement. We deserve freedom, for ourselves and for the galaxy. This is what is right, and if we must fight for our freedom, so be it.

Know that I am with you in spirit, if not in body. Know that as you fight Thaereians in the streets and skies of Cularin, I am waging my own war. May the Force be with Cularin.

The transmission ends. For a few seconds the screen is blank. Then we hear voices, somewhat frantic, and the video feed begins once more. Yara has changed clothes and her makeup is complete. She looks to her right before speaking.

Yara: Strong words. Other news just in: Thaereian fighters have engaged Militia fighters just inside the asteroid belt. Initial reports indicated that the Thaereian ships outnumbered Cularin's ships almost three to one. Cularin Central Broadcasting satellites just inside the Belt obtained the following video. I must warn you: What you are about to see is undoctored, and some viewers may find the images disturbing.

Cut to a space battle. Z-95 Headhunters with green-and-white Cularin Militia insignias on their wings dodge and weave through a cloud of fighters – some Headhunters, some other models – bearing the markings of the Thaereian Navy. The odds look much worse than three to one, and as we watch, several ships explode. At least two of the ships were definitely Militia vessels, and two more could have been. The fight isn't going well for the outnumbered Militia fighters.

Then a haze appears in the background, and from behind the battlefield, several dozen fighters emerge, followed by a large freighter with multiple quad-lasers. The newcomers tear into the battle, and Thaereian ships begin to explode right and left. The fight lasts less than a minute before the Thaereian ships that remain retreat into the asteroid belt, the newcomers giving chase. Several of the recent arrivals zip past the satellite that's been recording the action, and we see that they all bear an identical marking on their wings. Superimposed on an image of Cularin, in green and white, is a stylized letter "N."

Destabilization

It's said that half of what you read on the holonet is bogus, and the other half is just plain wrong. But this thread of slicer postings seems to have stumbled onto something big -- Thaere's plan to crush the Cularin resistance.

[[posttime 21:23:07]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid tinyf111]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node a13.882]]

heya. was making with the plunder this morning on thaere's old holonet nodes and found this. kinda thought everyone might wanna see it; went ahead and sliced the encryption for y'all too
later ~Tiny.F.

Security Classification D

To: All Cularin-based Commanders, Thaereian Navy EMF

Fr: Tramsig

Re: Destabilization

Refer to standard encryption log S-2, pseudonet file slash-N. Message begins.
// Our leverage on key personnel in Cularin has been lost. Further political destabilization is unlikely to take hold. Social and economic destabilization program commences immediately. You all understand the risk we are taking. Keep Jedi at a distance; they are both our fulcrum and our lever. For the greater good, for the prosperity of Thaere, and for the continuation of life as it must be in our galaxy, this must be done. It is not my nature to ask things of you that I would not do myself, but I cannot do everything. There will be resistance. Cularin is known for its resistance. Find the resistance and CRUSH IT. The witch will shout and stomp all over Coruscant, but I've been assured that she won't make headway that our allies don't want her to make. What we must do is keep Cularin controlled. We will not be able to keep the people happy, but we can at least keep them quiet.//

// We will take losses. This is inevitable. But when one commits to the cause of right, one understands that the greater good cannot and will not be achieved without sacrifice. May the Force be with you. May the Force be with us all.//

// Tramsig//

Message ends.

[[posttime 21:26:27]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid wampa1]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92]]

Tiny - what node that come from? U got to tell us more. Dangling that kind of heaviness don't last 4 long with these nodes. U come up with something more than shooting big mouths across the holonet and people listen to u.

Ur friend, wampa1

[[posttime 21:31:01]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid myrlinator]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node b513.2]]

wampa1, you slicer-dreaming dirt magnet - you couldn't slice bread with a lightsaber

get this - if you take the node address tinyf posted this from and track the databit history, you pull right to the node that the original data came from - it's a thaereian node, tee-aitch-dot-ex-one-dot-one-dot-three-dot-eight (thought I'd spell it out since your pathetic synapses don't seem to be able to fire in sequence long enough to follow even the simple bits of data history tinyf left for us - and if you didn't already know that "th" is the prefix for all the thaereian nodes, well, I just can't help you)

if you can't figure out this basic poodoo, just get off the holonet before mommy takes away your datapad and the space slugs game card you saved up your allowance to buy

[[posttime 21:36:37]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid wampa1]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92]]

U think ur so smart myrl? I can slice anything I want. I just wanted to see if u and the other scrubs on here could figure it out 4 themselves. U better watch hoo u call a dirt magnet, and remember that dirt's not got enuff metal in it on most planets to even be magnetic, which shows how dumb u r.

wamap1

[[posttime 21:41:53]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]

[[userid tharestinx]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node nn3.012]]

Wow.

Wampa1 can't even spell his own name. Worse than that, the little nerf-knot isn't on a floating node. He's probably posting from home. Somebody want to smack him down - maybe call his mother?

[[posttime 21:46:18]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid wampa1]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92]]

(Or we could just take over his node and create real havoc with it - hugs and kisses, Alyssa, future apprentice to Baylan - if you read this, you sexy slicer beast, you just backslice this and find me - it'll be worth your while!)

[[posttime 22:14:14]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid OPS199a]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node ops.3.2442]]

The Office of Peace and Security on Cularin has been notified of the existence of this documentation. We will be forwarding it on to all appropriate parties. If the validity of this documentation is established, it may serve to assist Senator Wren in obtaining intervention in our current situation. OPS appreciates the work of civic-minded individuals like yourselves in preserving the best interests of Cularin.

Sincerely,

Jarg Fleffant
Corporal, Gadrin OPS

[[posttime 22:22:23]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid alyssaroxu]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node am.8892.2]]

Fleffant? What the excrement kind of name is "Fleffant"?

Not to sound flippant (or fleffant, for that matter), but if OPS thinks this little bit of intelligence is going to change anything anywhere, they're cracked. I think everyone here knows - you skirt the edge of what's allowed, no one says a thing. I see that original memo, or whatever it was, and I see lots of skirting. Tell me what's wrong with a military that's "protecting" people putting down revolts. I dare you. Can't? There's a reason.

It sounds scary with everything that's been happening. It doesn't mean it means anything.

Just playing dark side's advocate here.

Hugs and kisses, Alyssa, future apprentice to Baylan

[[posttime 22:31:49]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid IMPEVERI]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node hed.a1]]

I tend to take this seriously. It fits with everything we know about Thare's activities so far, and if it can be authenticated, does present a compelling case for our Militia having acted as it did. I will not go so far as to say it is accurate - not 100%, at least - but I am willing to credit it as containing potentially relevant information.

- WI

[[posttime 22:40:33]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid kelsoblod]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node 11s.2396.79]]

Anybody know if that was who I think it was? Politicos don't read these nodes, do they?

[[posttime 22:43:57]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid tharestinx]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node f88.12w348]]

Dunno. I always figured everybody read these nodes, and that when I posted something the entire galaxy took it seriously and pondered the deep emotional and metaphysical manifestations of my brilliance.

Are you suggesting that the entire galaxy might not be aware of my brilliance? I just can't accept that.

[[posttime 22:46:27]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid wampa1]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92]]

ha alyssa u think u r smart just like myrl but u r not, ur name is alysssa maggrit and u r 12 years old and were born on tolea biqua so how smart do u think u r now

AND STAY OUT OF MY NODE

Not at all ur friend, wampa1

[[posttime 22:51:00]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid gunganimpala]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node otoh.7211471]]

Alyssa, was that you or the dirt magnet?

[[posttime 23:00:19]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid alyssaroxu]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node ff5.r196u]]

The dirt magnet. He rather brilliantly uncovered the identity of the little Duros girl who lives on Tolea Biqua and runs numbers for her uncle. I'm sure uncle is going to love hunting down wampa1 and stringing him up.

There any other bigwigs on here? I wanna hear more whacked-out conspiracy theories. Don't get me wrong, I don't like Thaere - but this is all kind of immature, you know? Who really believes that Thaere has been plotting to do something mean and nasty to Cularin, anyway? It's all part of the game that the politicians play, and I'm sick of having to watch it.

Hugs and kisses, Alyssa, future apprentice and love slave to Baylan

[[posttime 23:04:44]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid __0__]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node 0.0.0]]

My sources tell me that this is accurate. They also tell me that it was meant to be found. Thaere wants people angry. They know what that means for them.

[[posttime 23:14:11]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid mstrslcr]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node hj8802.19]]

Okay, anyone else able to slice that last one? I tried every trick and every bit of gear I've got, and if anyone can nail down what the Sith a 0.0.0 holonet node actually means, I want to know. I also want a copy of whatever gear you used, since I just bounced off everything when I started trying to get into the things that looked like 0.0.0.

This whole thing is starting to bug me out. Meaning, I got some good ideas about what's been going on with Thaere. Some of my friends got picked up by Thaere patrols and never came home again. They been doing this for a while and no one called them on it.

Anyone get what "social and economic destabilization program" means? Anyone else think the economic part might be tied to whatever the Cartel got so wet in the shorts about a while back?

I know some folks (looking at Alyssa) don't get into the conspiracy thing. I say, you go on living in that little dream world, because the whole universe is full of conspiracies. Closing your eyes doesn't mean the conspiracies aren't there. Just means you don't see them. That's what people like Tramsig want.

[[posttime 23:19:42]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid l337b0i]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node 0.0.0]]

Anyone can spoof a node location. Lookie. I'm at 0.0.0. Who are you, mstrslcr - wampa1 with a spellcheck?

You go on with your conspiracy theories. Tell you something - no matter what kind of theory you come up with, you always miss the real cause of whatever's going on. Think you know? You don't. Think you got a clue? Whatever. You couldn't buy a clue from a corrupt OPS hound with a pastry fetish.

Thaere... bad news, bucky. They haven't gone anywhere. Just look at how things are set up for them. How long did they have to set up a perimeter - 10 years? What were they doing before and since? Don't look too hard, it'll make your head hurt.

Best thing you can do is stay underground. They don't want us. They want the Jedi.

Think about it. Then stay out of the way and let the prissy laser-sword-wielding do-gooders get what's coming to them.

[[posttime 23:25:03]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid alyssaroxu]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node bdgr1.8u2]]

Actually, l337, you're at node y21.a7.230, subnet qr6, terminal located on a ship docked at Varna Biqua.

There is no conspiracy here. No way is this about the Jedi. Most of the ones that mattered got yanked out of here when the big war started. Now there's 2 masters - a kook in robes who's teaching because the council doesn't know where else to put him, and a scary chick with a thing for long glowing objects - and a bunch of knights and padawannabes.

I'll just say it: Cularin has NO TACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE. Why come up with theories to explain something that makes no sense to do, if you're at war?

Sheesh. It's more fun to slag on wampa1.

Hugs and kisses, Alyssa, future life partner to Baylan

[[posttime 23:44:57]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid aidedecamp]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node ghc.8.112]]

I have been in contact with Senator Wren, and she has expressed deep concern over the contents of this message. It is her feeling that this does indicate that Thaere has been planning to take control of Cularin for some time, and that it was only through the quick and judicious action by Cularin's Militia that a forced occupation was averted.

The Senator is not, at this time, speculating on the steps that might be taken by Thaere as the emergent conflict progresses, nor is she speculating on the nature of the reported relationship between Thaere and the Separatist movement. She wishes to emphasize to the people of Cularin that our system remains strictly loyal to the Galactic Senate and Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

Expect a public statement from the Senator shortly regarding likely disposition of the situation as it currently is understood as a follow-up to Operation False Horizon.

[[posttime 23:51:32]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid kelsoblod]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node am1.00.717]]

Was that legit? There's enough doublespeak and nonsense that I'd almost believe that came from a politician. Anyone else?

[[posttime 23:56:11]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid l@2erbr@1n]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node cnmm.wdg.91303]]

Nerfalicious. All you space slugs wandering around in a haze and wondering what's going on. I'll TELL YOU WHAT'S GOING ON. You're going to die. If I was one of those half-speaking brainless gunga-types, I'd say there's a 'bombad war' coming. Thing is, you know who gets killed in war? Dumb people . So go on, go out and fight, be dumb, and come back in a box.

This is how it's always been. People are going to die. Who builds a huge military to protect a little backwater like Cularin?

Nobody. There's always been something else here. You people were too dumb to see this coming. You deserve what you get.

[[posttime 23:59:58]]
[[postdate [yesterday]]]
[[userid N]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node 814.7]]

Let them come. Many of us are ready to defend our homes with whatever it takes.

Anyone who believes that only those who fight in wars die in wars has a lot to learn. May you live long enough to see the galaxy more clearly.

~N

[[posttime 00:04:19]]
[[postdate [today]]]
[[userid kelsoblod]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node io.15.18.25]]

I'm starting to think maybe lots of people who are pretty major are on this. Anyone else get the feel that maybe if we don't let this slide, someone's going to be knocking on doors? Meaning, I know everyone here thinks they're pretty hot slice-juice, but how good are we hidden?

You also got to think about who's gonna like or not like what you got to say. Take a stand on either side, and you got a chance to end up on the wrong side. Me, I think there's lots of bad, but I don't think I know where the big badness is. Thaere don't look kind, but if they win do you want to be one of the people they find who said they parented wampa1? Just saying.

The rest of you say you're fine with this. Conspiracy theories and all. I don't care. I'm scared. If this is real, and Thaere wants to take out Cularin, can we really stop them?

If being scared makes me lame, then I'm lame. At least I'm honest about it. Not like some of you.

[[posttime 00:16:17]]
[[postdate [today]]]
[[userid wampa1]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92]]

haha kelsoblod u r a wimp and an UBERl@mer nobody will takl to u again so u should just lv

look everybody at scaredy kelso

hahahaha

[[posttime 00:18:22]]
[[postdate [today]]]
[[userid alyssaroxu]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node 0909.hus1]]

FYI... wampa1's node just served as a transmittal station for 3 trillion copies of a picture of his mom at a swank restaurant with a hairy gundark. I think I smelled smoke. We won't be hearing from him again any time soon.

Hugs and kisses, Alyssa, future apprentice to Baylan

[[posttime 00:30:00]]
[[postdate [today]]]
[[userid holosrv]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node central1.02.a19]]

At 21:23:07 yesterday, materials were posted to this forum which potentially violated security parameters. Cularin holonet services hereby suspends this forum until further notice. Any individuals contributing further to this discussion will be brought in for questioning.

Have a pleasant day.

[[posttime 00:32:35]]
[[postdate [today]]]
[[userid wampa1]]
[[postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92]]

[image of human woman and gundark seated in a romantic restaurant]

[this message then repeats another 15 times]

Reidi Artom's Expansion Manifesto

Reidi Artom's face is familiar to any citizen of Cularin; the enormous statue of her that stands in the center of Gadrin makes it difficult for anyone not to be able to visualize her features. But aside from her well-publicized jaunts across the galaxy and her penchant for attempting to name systems after herself (at least three different star systems had to be renamed after Reidi "discovered" them and registered them as variants of her own name, rather than using the galactic standard of basing the name off the central star or planet), relatively little was known about this industrious woman.

Recently, Tarasin of the Vriisan irstat came forward with a set of coordinates they claimed to have passed down from generation to generation. While now is not the time for frivolous exploration of Cularin's jungles (and these coordinates pointed deep inside the jungles), a team was eventually gathered. What they found was remarkable.

When she left Cularin, Reidi Artom left a record of what she had done here, and why, with the Vriisan irstat. The Mother of the Vriisan, Kasslan, spoke to the team about what she knew.

"A Mother before Niroida, the Mother whose place I have attempted to fill these last thirty years, told stories of the Artom. They were not her stories to tell, any more than they are mine. A Mother whose name is lost to us told them first. The Artom told our people that wherever she went, she left records -- but that she left them in the hands of those who were already present. She said a number of things, and each Mother in our line has been tasked with remembering a few of the words precisely. These, I share with you now.

"It is right that life should expand to fill the spaces available for its completion, to find the proper means of balance. Always remember this: That all life is sacred, that all striving deserves reward, and that whenever you reach a place that is new to you, there will be those who were there before. Respect those who came before. Trust them with your life and your hope, as by accepting your coming, they are entrusting you with theirs."

The Mother of the Vriisan irstat then led the explorers to a cave, guarded by the Vriisan since Reidi Artom left Cularin two hundred years ago. From that cave, the following writings -- on bizarre parchments -- were brought forth, giving us Reidi Artom's true thoughts on expansion in the galaxy.

There is a part of me that hopes that my words will never be read. Anyone with whom I've entrusted their keeping knows very well that I did not create them to be read in anything but a situation most dire. (I'm not in love with my own voice, and my words often fall short of what I want them to say. I feel the need to explain things in too-great detail, and it grows tiring after only a short time.)

There is a long and a short version of this message. I will subject you to the long before offering you the short. Perhaps hearing it in two ways (I make the assumption that you will read both) will help it to sink in.

In the galaxy, there is life beyond what we can imagine. I have traveled from one side to another, walked on planets where the sun never sets and settled into orbit to watch ice hurricanes tear down mountains. I have seen binary stars. I have seen systems so new-formed that the vapors around the stars had yet to coalesce into bodies that might eventually become planets. I have seen systems where all that remained was a moon-sized body with the density of star and planets combined, where the energy radiating from the body threatened to overwhelm my sensors. But most of all I have seen life, in a thousand thousand forms. Two legs or four or eight or a hundred, winged or walking, chittering, speaking, grunting or howling - I've seen life. Some of it scares me. All of it is beautiful.

Much of the life I have seen is relatively untouched by the remainder of the galaxy. It has developed in its own way, in its own time. It looks at me with fearful eyes. I come from the sky. Some of the civilizations I have found have never even learned the secrets of flight, much less hyperspace. I have been treated as a being to be worshipped, and I have been savagely hunted. Through it all, I tried to understand (as well as a limited mind such as mine can) and to communicate. It was my responsibility, after all. If I could find them, so could someone else. If I had found them, someone else would.

I saw, when I was young, that the galaxy would not stop expanding. So long as there is space to be filled, the species who can travel the stars will seek to fill it. So long as there is space that can be taken, the species without scruples will attempt to take it.

What must be remembered, always, is that no claim of territorial expansion can be justified so long as the indigenous species do not recognize the rights of others to expand into their territory. Sentient creatures should at least be warned that their lives may be disrupted, that things may change in ways that they can neither predict nor understand (and if I had my way, we would ask permission before doing such; I do not, quite obviously, have my way). Nonsentients may not be warned (or warnable), but at least the likely impact of colonization on species that cannot speak for themselves should be assessed.

This brings me to the reason for this document, which you may treat as my expansion manifesto. (It is an admitted conceit of mine that the work I have done exploring the galaxy and expanding what is known may, one day, be of some import to someone; if I am wrong, it is a delusion that I will cling to like a gundark to a fresh-killed nerf for as long as I am able.) I hope that whomever reads this document has at least some appreciation for what has been done. If you are reading this, a system that I warned about the perils of colonization may be in danger of being wiped out through the careless and wasteful misappropriation of resources or a struggle between groups who are not even *from* this system for its control. If either (or both) of these is true, I ask that you consider the following, and consider it well.

There is neither cause nor effect except that which we create. Through action or through inaction, we shape our own experiences as well as those of others with whom we interact. It is therefore incumbent upon us to sincerely reflect on the likely consequences of our actions, and to allow for the possibility that however well-intentioned we may be, it is also possible that we are wrong. None of us have ascended to the status of infallibility. It is always possible -- and frequently likely -- that we will make mistakes.

I mentioned two possibilities that might have triggered the delivery of this material to your hands. (If you are, in fact, a xenoarchaeologist somewhere far in the future who has simply happened upon this cache of information, I hope you find it useful. You are not now, nor were you ever, my target audience. That being said, I hope you conclude from your studies of these documents that at least some of us at the time in which I lived had thoughts of some existence beyond the short span of years we would ultimately occupy, and possessed an awareness of something beyond ourselves -- if I may be permitted the conceit of believing that I think beyond myself, and then praising

that selfsame ability.) The first possibility is the careless or wasteful misappropriation of resources.

This can occur in a number of ways, of course. It might go without saying that one of the reasons that systems remained for me to "discover," after so many generations of space exploration, was a lack of resources that interested the remainder of the galaxy. Our species (I speak in the broad sense of space-going species) are generally creatures of faddish habit. That is to say, we know what we like, and we go after what we like, but we also tend to fall into whatever phenomenon has most recently been presented to us as the "next big thing."

Habit encourages colonization. We habitually travel between the stars. As such, any freshly discovered system that offers resources relevant to traveling between the stars will be colonized and have its natural wares appropriated as quickly as possible. We habitually make war on one another. Thus, any system we happen upon that provides the supplies we need to wage war more efficiently becomes grounds for plunder. I could list dozens of habits we have, from the painful (war) to the mundane (some species prefer sweet foods). I will not do so, instead allowing you to think of such habits on your own.

The fads are more short-lived. We discover something that is interesting or pleasant, and we engage ourselves with it, quite intensely, for a relatively short period of time. When the excitement wears off, we leave the fad again. Little in our lives has changed.

Fad does not encourage colonization. Fads that require colonization do not become fads, because they are too much work. Fads work best when they are based off things that we have access to, habitually, but that we've never actually looked at in a given way before. The current system, for example, offers beautiful woods.

Who uses woods? Right now, no one. A few decades ago, woods from several Outer Rim territories became very popular with the intelligentsia on Coruscant for use in furniture. It was a decorating fad that lasted five years, give or take. Then it was gone. But the place where the materials came from -- several territories -- had been colonized before, and remained colonized after the fad ended. Other resources existed there.

When that fad began, no one rushed to this system. It wasn't worth the time or the credits to do so. The fad would not support continued existence here, and until something is found that will keep individuals settled, the population

will remain primarily centered in the quaint little tribes that dot the jungles of the main world.

It is not unlikely, in any system, that in its early years, certain of its resources may be violently depleted. We must remember that the system is not here for our benefit any more than we are here for its. We must think not in terms of "What can we get here?" but instead, "How can we live here?" All things are interconnected. If we deplete the place where we live, even if that occurs only for a short time, we also deplete ourselves. That we are separate from the space we inhabit -- that we can act on it without feeling consequences -- is an egocentric fallacy. We are not just ourselves. We are also, in part, all of the things around us.

The second possibility (noting that these are not mutually exclusive) is that the system is imperiled because multiple groups have come here and now vie for control of something to which neither (none?) of them is inherently entitled. It's a curious thing: We sentients pick a sector of space that "belongs" to no one (or if it does come close to belonging to anyone, it's someone who was here eons ago, before we even considered coming here) and argue most vociferously over who controls it.

We often call this "war."

I don't suppose I need to proselytize about the evils of war. People die, the survivors live off anger and hate and a dozen other harmful emotions, and the galaxy changes, if at all, for the worse. No one wins.

What needs to be remembered is that the right to "claim" a particular place is not a function of military power. If such a right exists (and I do not know if it does), then it surely has relatively little to do with who has more weapons, and much more to do with who loves the place itself. There are always those who want a particular place, who believe they should control it. But there are also those, in many cases, who are connected to the place. They are part of it. They could no longer leave the place than you or I could remove our brains and continue functioning. The species and the place are inseparable. These species, quite often, become bystanders in wars.

Except that there are no bystanders in wars. There are only combatants and accidents.

Think carefully about your path. I don't claim to be the wisest of individuals, but I've seen a lot. Beauty and sorrow, joy and pain. Expansion is good, and should be continued. But it should not do so at the expense of what has gone before.

I leave you with the short version of this rather extended bit of folk wisdom. It is right that life should expand to fill the spaces available for its completion, to find the proper means of balance. Always remember that all life is sacred, that all striving deserves reward, and that whenever you reach a place that is new to you, there will be those who were there before. Respect those who came before. Trust them with your life and your hope, as by accepting your coming, they are entrusting you with theirs.

Smuggler's Trade

Kodo Arr, a recent arrival to Cularin, regales cantina-goers with stories of his training on Nar Shaddaa. Kodo - the self-proclaimed "best smuggler in the galaxy" - has a lot to say, and some of it might even be true. Check it out in our latest supplement to the **Living Force** campaign!

The cantina is one of dozens of nameless establishments on Tolea Biqua whose front is an unspectacular but immediately recognizable, pre-constructed façade of the same design as every other dive Riboga set up to anonymously run whatever he wanted to run. It's filled with a purplish haze that hovers near the floor, wafting up almost into your line of sight when fast-moving feet disrupt it. It scarcely moves at all for the slow trod of drunken feet much more common this night. Music pumps in the background, a recording of a Bith band whose private studio just off Coruscant burned last year in a "freak accident." Authorities might investigate, if not for a pesky war diverting their attention. The music, like the haze, is strange -- muted -- as if something more important is going on and your senses have been dulled to everything but that one, more important event.

Scanning the cantina, your eyes pass over the stray individual seated at a table or leaning against the bar in a tipsy demonstration of inertia. Eventually, an outside force will act on them, and they will move. But not until then.

A few moments pass as you adjust to the ambiance. Just below the throb-wail of the music, you begin to hear a murmur. Voices trickle up to you, hiding in the haze that creeps and swirls along the floor, emanating from a table in the darkened back corner of the cantina. This is what has the music so low, the haze so thick and sharp smelling, and the patrons so stoic. This is the Something More Important, and it seems only natural to wander over for a look. As you do, a Trandoshan -- his face bright red from the alcohol and his eyes as wide as a child's -- turns and staggers away from the table. He leaves an opening just large enough for you to slide into before the small crowd gathered around the table closes up once more.

There, on the far side of the table, sits a Human male of middle years. He sports close-cropped white hair and a growth of pale stubble that might be the beginnings of a beard. Even in the low light of the cantina, you can see his eyes with perfect clarity. Enormous pupils glance up at you from the center of irises of such a pale blue as to appear almost white. He nods, almost in your direction, almost seeming to recognize your presence, then takes a sip of his ale and seems to continue where he left off. "Nar Shaddaa. Like I said, it's a place like nothing you ever did see..."

Nar Shaddaa. Like I said, it's a place like nothing you ever did see. Don't get me wrong. I've seen bigger and I've seen meaner, but it's Hutt space about as true as you can get. Stuck up there right over Nal Hutta, locked in orbit, spires and platforms everywhere. I spent way more time there than I ever wanted to, that's a sure enough thing. But every minute you live there is one minute you're not dying there, and that's a trick.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not about to sit here blowing sand up your nose and tell you it's spice. That's not the way I work. I mean, I'm Kodo Arr, best smuggler in the galaxy, and there were times when I thought, "Kodo, there's no way you're making it off this pile of rock. You're gonna die here just like every other bantha-brain who thought he could come in, trick the Hutts, and come out ahead."

This one time -- no lie -- I was making a moonside run. That's what we call it when we're just moving goods from one part of Nar Shaddaa to another, and let me tell you, even that's nothing to sneeze at. There's patrols everywhere. See, you hear all these stories about Nar Shaddaa being lawless and dangerous, and that's because it is. There's no "law" like what I hear you got in Cularin. You got your peace and security folks, and your militia folks. You know

what Hutts have? Bounty hunters. Bounty hunters and bruisers. And if you think Hutts don't patrol what's theirs, you must have dipped into the happy jar one too many times. You don't get power in the galaxy without being willing to break some rules, but you don't keep power in the galaxy without being willing to *make* some rules. I guess you can call them "laws," if you want, but nobody writes down Hutt laws. You either know 'em and follow 'em or you don't and end up dead. Unless you're like me. Because there's not supposed to be unauthorized moonside runs, but here I was, making one, moving a shipment of delicates and fragiles from one vendor to another.

So I'm cruising along in my T-16 -- you can laugh, but you take one of those critters and pump a hundred large in credits into it, and it can do some amazing stuff while still looking like junk. Don't get me wrong. You folks who are still puttering around in the factory version are doing fine by yourselves, but sometimes, a man needs a little more.

I've got the delicates and fragiles in this bin that I'm dragging behind. Because, like we all know, you don't put the delicates and fragiles inside your ship. They cause all kinds of trouble, make messes, stink up the place -- you know how it goes. Plus, when you're pulling an unauthorized load, you need to know that you can cut it free if you want and let it head for the dirt level on its own. There's worse things than losing a cargo, and most of them involve getting caught by the Hutts running product without a license.

Anyway, I'm cruising along, trying to keep from ducking too low between the buildings. The thing nobody tells you about Nar Shaddaa -- and mark my words on this, 'cause I got no reason to lie -- is that once you get about a half-kilometer below the peaks of the spires, *nobody* knows how to drive. It's not even incompetence, I don't think, because to be incompetent you have to have some idea of what you're trying to do, and most of the people that fly around Nar Shaddaa, they got less than no idea what they're doing. You watch them try to fly, and they sit there with a hand on the yoke and a hand on their comlink, yapping away, not paying a bit of attention to anything around them. Then they're running into somebody else, and both speeders are falling right out of the sky, two big balls of fire that take out another three or four speeders on their way down.

This is an easy run I'm on, though. I figure, I take the delicates and fragiles to the right warehouse and they validate my datapad. I get paid, everybody's happy, and so far things are going off without a hitch.

See, that's the kind of thought you should never have. Because nothing ever goes off without a hitch. No sooner do I say that than I hear something start to creak toward the back of my speeder. It's not a creaking I know, either. It's a bad creaking, like something's about to fall off. I plug R5 into the controls and tell him, "Don't let my speeder hit anything it's not supposed to." R5 beeps back at me -- because he's a droid, see, and can't talk -- and starts to steer while I head for the back to see what's going on.

If you ever been in a T-16, you know they're not the sturdiest things flying. Even with all my special modifications, it's still got weaknesses, and one of the biggest is the superstructure at the rear. Apparently -- and if you ask me, this is something they need to put in the owner's manual -- if you attach a huge metal box that's bigger than the speeder to the back of the speeder and then pull it through a dirty, nasty atmosphere, you get pretty major drag. And if you get enough drag, you can start pulling the back of your ship off. Which about defines "not good."

I get back there, see metal bending, rivets popping, and I shout up to R5, I shout, "Kill the engines and put up the rear shields!" Thinking I was actually in a ship that had rear shields just about got me killed, too. See, the speeder's got brakes, but the big metal box that's floating behind the speeder doesn't.

I don't mind telling you, that had me nervous for a couple seconds, when I figured out that we didn't have shields and we *did* have a few tons of fragile-and-delicate-filled metal coming at us. Then I remembered that one of the things I was carrying was some leftover droideka parts, and they were down in my hold. So I jumped down there, whipped out that box, attached those big droids' shield generators to the rear wall of my ship, wired them into the main power grid, boosted them with a few quick adjustments, and turned them on -- about two seconds before I hear a *thump* on the far side of the wall.

Oh, don't believe me? I don't care.

Lesson? I don't guess there is a lesson. That's just one of the tricks I learned on Nar Shaddaa. I got a trillion of 'em, too. Every day, it's something different, and there's always smugglers to learn from. Too bad nobody there's gonna be learning from the best any time soon. Because he's right here.

So, who's buying me the next round?

Riboga's Legacy

Riboga the Hutt is long gone from Cularin, but he's not forgotten. His reputation for cruelty and his penchant for going beyond what even a crimelord might consider appropriate are the subject of interviews conducted with anonymous sources around Tolea Biqua.

Greetings, friends. This is Ryk Osentay, reporting for "Eye On Cularin." I'm live today from Cularin's own little hive of scum and villainy, Tolea Biqua.

Ryk steps out of the doorway in which he had been standing and begins walking down a narrow Tolea Biqua street. Bright neon lights flash overhead, and a speeder whips past him, dangerously close, sending him spinning in a full circle before he continues to walk as though nothing happened. He passes a trio of shady types who pull back away from the camera with a flurry of whispers. Other individuals, mostly oblivious to his presence, pass him on the street. Ryk doesn't look nearly as tall when he's standing beside other people as he does when he's sitting down. He turns, looks over his shoulder, and speaks without slowing his pace.

As you know, Cularin Central Broadcasting has not allowed a live feed from Tolea Biqua since Melanda Forswoth's disappearance over a year ago. Melanda remains missing, and it was only through some serious negotiations --

The word "Begging" scrolls across the bottom of the screen.

-- that I was able to gain permission to come here with a remote. I have a few advantages Melanda didn't, however. For instance, I work out.

The screen scrolls, "He also has a security detail he doesn't know about locked 500 meters directly above his head."

I'm here today to find individuals to talk to me about Riboga. What did the Hutt mean to Cularin, and what legacy did he leave behind? There's nowhere that this legacy may be more apparent than Tolea Biqua, the city the Hutt all but built. Gambling, cantinas, all manner of vice --- they are what Tolea Biqua was known for. What it still is known for, to a great extent. These streets are very dangerous to the unwary individual. Thankfully, Ryk Osentay is not at all unwary.

"Which is why he doesn't know there's a ship with a firelinked turbolaser battery directly above his head."

All right. Are we ready? I see someone over there that we can interview.

Ryk hurries across the street to a figure slumped against the wall, sitting with his knees pulled up against his chest and his forehead resting between his knees. In the increased light from the camera, we see a pair of horns sprouting from either temple -- a Devaronian.

Ryk: Excuse me, sir? I'm Ryk Osentay, of "Eye on Cularin," and I'd like to speak with you. Do you have a few minutes?

Devaronian (not raising his head): Eh?

Ryk: I'd like to ask you some questions about the time when Riboga was here. Were you here when Riboga ruled Cularin's criminal underworld with an iron fist?

Devaronian (still not raising his head): Eh?

Ryk: Sir? Are you awake?

Devaronian: You seem dense. I don't want to talk.

Ryk: But I'm Ryk Osentay, from "Eye on Cularin"!

Devaronian (still not looking up): I thought that was Yara's show. Aren't you just one of the lap dogs she keeps around to go out and do the stupid work when she's too busy?

Ryk (blushing): Actually, "Eye" is my show, now. Yara asked to be re-assigned to the newsdesk permanently to deal with issues relating to the war, leaving me to do the local interest topics. And Riboga is certainly of local interest, wouldn't you say?

"It's not that we actually like Ryk, mind you. He's got an ego the size of Yara's make-up budget, and his idea of 'preparation' is what someone else does in the kitchen. He's been bugging us to let him go to Tolea Biqua ever since he saw the ratings Melanda's disappearance pulled."

Devaronian: The less anyone says about that bloated, slime-sucking, freak, the better. Why do you give a panthac's paw about him, anyway?

Ryk: Because, as the Jedi Code teaches us, evil is never really created or destroyed, but only changes forms.

The Devaronian looks up. His eyes are dead black, and the place where his nose used to be is a bloody hole. He glares at Ryk.

Devaronian: One, that's not the Jedi Code. That's not even something you'd pull out of a Jedi party favor. Two, you're starting to make Yara look like a rocket scientist. Now, get out of here before I call the wrath of the heavens down on my own head just to make you go away!

The screen goes black. The words, "Ryk didn't actually get that last comment" appear, then disappear as we fade back in on Ryk approaching a group of three Rodian females, each a distinctly different shade of green, and a fairly tall Wookiee.

Ryk: Hi, I'm Ryk Osentay, from "Eye on Cularin."

Rodian female 1: No way! Get out of here, you!

Rodian female 2: You're not Yara, either. What's up with this? It's like, we keep getting on "Eye," but like, it's never with Yara. I used to be her biggest fan, before she went and got all serious and started robe-chasing! She's still better than you, though.

Rodian female 3: Didn't you used to announce Podraces from the pits? Wasn't it you who dropped a microphone into that mean Dug's engine that one time, and got pounded live on the air?

"In addition to being an egomaniac, Ryk isn't particularly smart. For instance, we're confident that he won't bother reviewing the full version of this segment. He'll just want the video of him, to see how he looked. Seriously, what kind of man tries to duplicate the ratings pulled by an on-air disappearance by going back to the same place the disappearance happened? If Yara were still in charge, things would be better. We can't believe we just said that."

Ryk: Um, no. That wasn't me. And this isn't Yara's show any more, it's mine. I'm Ryk Osentay, new host of "Eye on Cularin."

Rodian female 2: You know that we were, like, some of the last people to see that Melanda woman before Falsswon got her? Man, that was rough! You should have seen the way she was looking that day. All hot and stuff. Is that what you're here about?

"Ryk didn't bother studying Melanda's video before he came out. We did. Editors confirm that these are the same individuals Melanda interviewed before disappearing."

Ryk (slightly flustered): I'm not here about Melanda. She's missing, so she's not currently employed by the show. I'd like to talk to you about Riboga, the Hutt who once controlled the system.

Wookiee: Grunt. Grunt.

"Let's see if Ryk falls for this."

Ryk (to camera): My translator's on the fritz. What did carpet-back say?

Wookiee: I said, "Grunt. Grunt." It's a standard tactic I use in determining whether I'm dealing with a moron who relies on a translator. It's now worked twice against individuals from your network. If you insist on being stupid, however, I will grant your interview. Call it sympathy. I am Nerrowr. These are my companions, Nesha, Besha, and Kesha.

Ryk: Ah. Triplets?

Nesha: Um, no.

Ryk: Twins?

Besha: Like, no. We're not related. We're just Rodians. Unless you're related to every, like, Human.

Ryk: So, how about that interview? What can you tell me about Riboga?

Nerrowr: What do you want to know? We all worked for him, at least for a time, prior to Nirama's emergence as the most powerful figure in the system.

Ryk: Most powerful criminal, you mean. I'm sure that Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk of the Jedi Academy is more powerful than Nirama.

Nerrowr: I meant what I said. Do you wish to hear what we have to say, or don't you?

Kesha: He's lame. He's got as much charisma as Yara's toes. Maybe.

Ryk: Really? I'd have thought Riboga would be oozing charisma. He was quite the feared criminal figure, after all. Of course, I never met him.

Nesha: She wasn't talking about Riboga.

Ryk (flustered): Let's stay on task, ladies. And gentlewookiee. We're here to talk about Riboga. What can you tell me?

As he asks the question, a young woman staggers past, bouncing off the camera and falling to the ground. Her face is a mess of blood and dirt, and the hair has been shaved from one side of her head. She whimpers, then pulls herself to her feet and starts to stagger off down the street. The camera follows her, though we still hear Ryk's interview.

Nerrowr: Riboga was a very powerful, very frightening individual. He left Cularin, but only in the way that a Hutt ever truly "leaves" a place he has occupied. There are still people in Cularin who are loyal to Riboga, and they will remain so until they die, or until he dies.

Ryk: So, when you say he hasn't really left, what do you mean? Is the Hutt still here?

Nerrowr: No. I said that he left Cularin. Talking to you is worthless. This conversation is finished.

The camera continues to follow the staggering young woman. She looks back and the frame freezes. Her face is shoved to the left half of the screen, and a familiar face appears beside it, on the right half of the screen. It is Melanda Forswoth, in an image from the interviews conducted the day before she vanished on Tolea Biqua. There's no doubt -- the two women are the same.

Interior, Cularin Central Broadcasting studios. Yara and Ryk sit side by side at the anchor desk. The dual images of Melanda hang suspended in the air behind them.

Ryk: I'm pleased to report that Melanda is in a hospital on Cularin, and she seems to be recovering physically. It's unclear where she was, or what was done to her, and the status of her mental recovery is in doubt. She may well remain a dancing vegetable for the remainder of her life, such as it is, but she has a life. And I'm pleased to say, it's all because of my crack investigative reporting.

Yara glares at him, then forces a smile.

Yara: Of course, Ryk. Nicely done. And I'm sure you'll be happy to hear that you get to go back to Tolea Biqua next week and ask more people about Riboga. Won't that be fun?

Ryk: I can hardly wait!

"And the sad thing is, we're pretty sure he means it."

Conflict and Mastery

In the Jedi Academy on Almas, there is a building at its heart with stone-lined paths leading in all directions. Many Padawans and Knights have walked these roads during the years of their training, but few ever venture into the building itself. Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk keeps this building separated from the rest of his Academy; while it rests in the center, it is effectively isolated from students and masters alike.

This building is where Lanius takes meetings with members of the Council on Coruscant, important Senate officials, and those who would not feel comfortable talking with him in public view. Though Almas is not exactly the hub of activity in the Cularin system, and young Padawans rarely gossip outside their own circles, news has a way of traveling fast in this part of the galaxy. Between sometimes overzealous reporters and the constantly prying eyes of those who should have better things to do, it can be hard to keep a secret . . . even for a Jedi Master.

This lone building also is where Lanius goes to meditate privately and contemplate the fate of his academy and his students in the changing face of the Republic. He has sensed for some time now the coming troubles and now that his students -- his world -- have been thrust ten years too soon into the midst of events too sweeping for him to control, Master Qel-Bertuk has spent

an increasing amount of time there lately.

Today finds him there not for personal reasons but for administrative ones. Once a season (though Almas does not truly have seasons to speak of), the higher faculty of the academy meet to discuss training, students showing great promise, and other Jedi matters. Lanius usually enjoys these meetings, but the chief topic at hand is not a pleasant one.

"And I will say it again. If the rumored changes I have heard are true, our Padawans can only suffer for them." Master Devan's eyes flashed in the torchlight of the chamber. "This school is already far different than any other Jedi Academy in the galaxy. We risk too much making any other changes."

In his stone chair at the head of the conference chamber, Lanius nodded distantly. He started to speak, but Jurahi, the school's Master of Visions, interjected. For a contemplative soul, the farsighted teacher could be emphatic to the point of near-belligerence when he felt strongly about something. "I rarely find myself in agreement with anything the Mistress of Battle has to say, Lanius, but I have to weigh in on her side here. Why are we even discussing this?"

Lanius' attention cut back to Devan. It amused him more than he thought might be appropriate to see her instinctive offense at being called "Mistress of Battle." He knew from long experience that Jurahi disdained the very concept of fighting and felt that Jedi who did their thinking with their lightsabers were the greatest threat the galaxy had ever known. It was a miracle the Master of Visions had been able to stand Kirlocca at all, but the Academy's former lightsaber instructor had been well liked by everyone on Almas -- even a pacifist like Jurahi.

Master Devan sighed. "Master Lanius, has this decision been made already, or are we going to be able to talk you out of it?" Her sentiment was echoed by the others at the table. Six sets of eyes focused on him, making Lanius more uncomfortable than he had been in a long time. Suddenly, he found himself missing Kirlocca more than ever. The big Wookiee would have understood why he was doing this. Kirlocca would not have liked it, but he would have understood.

Still, he was head of the Academy for a reason and a situation like this

demanded that he take a leadership stance. He steeled himself for the reactions he knew he was about to get and looked at the end of the table to the spot normally reserved for visiting dignitaries and emissaries from Coruscant. "Master Jeht, please tell the others what you shared with me this morning."

The man sitting at the end of the long stone table nodded grimly. His black eyes scanned the faces of the assembled Masters for a long moment before he spoke and when he did, it was with a quiet, respectful tone. "The Jedi Council on Coruscant has issued orders for all available Jedi to report to new sector staging areas for debriefing and tactical assignments. While this does not include Padawans, of course, and exceptions are being made for Jedi Knights with fewer than three years of experience in the role, everyone else has been recalled to wartime duty."

The expressions on his faculty's faces were exactly what he thought they would be. Worst was the look of bitter acceptance in Jurahi's eyes, as if he had finally heard something he had been fearing for a lifetime. Devan's expression was much less resigned. "This includes all the Masters here on Almas?"

The black-haired Master at the end of the table shook his head. The gesture made his dark grey robe shift slightly, revealing the light battle armor beneath. From the look of the contoured suit's slightly battered plates, it had seen very recent use. "Not all of them, no. The people in this room will be left in place to train Padawans and Knights as is their mandated role. Only additional personnel will be shifted away from the Academy to supplement the Army of the Republic."

Jurahi's expression changed, as did Devan's, but the older Master spoke before she could. "Additional personnel? Supplement the Army? Who does the Council think we are? We are a school, not a garrison!"

From the look in Jeht's colorless eyes, this response did not come as a surprise to him. "I am sorry you feel that way, sir. But the Jedi have been given command of the Republic Armed Forces, and the Council has decided to shift experienced Jedi into a greater leadership presence in that capacity. They feel -"

Devan opened her mouth, and for a moment, Lanius thought the impossible would happen twice in one day -- that she would agree with Jurahi again. "I understand, Master Jeht. The Council obviously believes that if we leave this

war to clones and droids alone, it will wear on forever. They want to step in and end this decisively without more loss of life, and before more systems fall to the Separatists."

The visiting Master nodded, obviously relieved that someone at the table understood. From the incredulous looks on the faces of the other instructors present, he, she, and Lanius were in the minority where that was concerned. Devan went on to ask, "How exactly will this affect Almas?"

In answer, Lanius gestured toward the shadowed arch leading out of the room and E1-6RA, his personal attendant droid, walked into the chamber. In her multiple arms, she had several small datapads. She moved adroitly around the table, handing one to each of the Jedi present. "These list the current residents of Almas and those serving in the Cularin system to be recalled by the Council's order," she said in her smoothly modulated voice.

There was a long pause as the faculty members parsed through their displays. Lanius watched their faces closely, knowing how poorly some of them would take the names they were reading. Master Ti-Amun Tiro got up, dropped the datapad on the table, and stormed out of the room in disgust. From the reactions of the others present, more than one of his fellow teachers wanted to join the philosophy instructor in silent protest.

No one spoke for several tense moments. Not surprisingly, it was Jurahi's voice that ended the silence. "This cuts our teaching staff to practically nothing. We have just taken on an unprecedented number of new Padawans. How can we be expected to find mentors for all of them?" His tone had lost its irritation. The quiet resignation was back.

Lanius shook his head sadly. "We will no longer be able to provide mentors for our students on a one-to-one basis. Class sizes will have to expand, and we will have to make do with the instructors we have left. Some Knights with only a year or two of service may be able to help fill out our ranks."

No one at the table seemed to like that idea, and Lanius could hardly blame them. The history of the Jedi was filled with examples of members of the Order teaching before they were fully qualified to do so. The examples never ended well; both master and student often were lost to the Dark Side. Such concerns obviously ran through the minds of the others. Lanius didn't have to touch their thoughts to know that. He could read it on their faces.

Master Jeht spoke again, his voice never wavering from its calm tone. "To finish what Master Qel-Bertuk did not get to say before, this decision has already been made. I have been instructed to oversee the transfer of personnel and then remain behind to help with additional training for your students. The Council does not wish to leave you completely understaffed. I will do my best to help make up the difference."

Lanius decided to speak before any more questions could inflame the situation. "We are grateful to the Council for sending you. You are at least one of our own, Darrus, and you will always be welcome here. Change is difficult, but we appreciate hearing this from someone we know."

Master Jeht bowed slightly. Devan seconded Lanius's thanks, but the rest of the table only murmured or nodded their consent. Lanius quickly dismissed the instructors. Perhaps returning to the usual business of classes and lessons would help to calm their understandably turbulent emotions. They left without comment, each one departing to carry the heavy news back to their staff and students.

Devan was the last to leave, her eyes alternately watching Darrus and Lanius for some sign of emotion. When she saw neither, she finally took her leave and returned to the practice hall. She felt for her Padawans, both for the changes that were about to befall them and for the mood in which she'd be teaching them . . .

Manifesto My Foot

A trio of privates in the Cularin Militia offer their interpretation of Reidi Artom's recently discovered "expansion manifesto." The general feeling of these grunts: She may have been a great explorer, but she didn't know much about war.

A few weeks ago, the Tarasin came forward with the location of a hidden cache of treasures -- in the form of information -- left behind by Reidi Artom over two centuries ago. Among these treasures (which continue to be explored by xenobiologists, sociologists, and various other academics) was a document that was published immediately, at the behest of Mother Kasslan of the Vriisan irstat. In that document, Reidi Artom outlined a number of elements of her

philosophy, both as it relates to expansion as a whole, and also as it relates to war.

Different portions of the manifesto have evoked different reactions among the people of Cularin, but perhaps the most contentious of her statements have to do with war. Artom wrote the following:

It's a curious thing we sentients do -- we pick a sector of space that "belongs" to no one (or if it does come close to belonging to anyone, it's someone who was here eons ago, before we even considered coming here), and argue most vociferously over who controls it.

We often call this "war."

I don't suppose I need to proselytize about the evils of war. People die, the survivors live off anger and hate and a dozen other harmful emotions, and the galaxy changes, if at all, for the worse. No one wins.

Given the current state of affairs in Cularin, it is not surprising that a number of individuals have taken issue with this statement. Notably absent from the discussion have been opinions from Osten Dal'Nay or Broof Yurdel, commanders of the Cularin Militia. Early this morning, a trio of young individuals made their way to the offices of Cularin Central Broadcasting and requested an interview with Yara Grugara. While they have asked not to be named, these three males -- a Human who asked to be called "Mack," a Cerean who identified himself as "Pac," and a Trandoshan who insisted we refer to him as "Grunt" -- are now ready to talk to Yara about their opinions on what Reidi Artom had to say. We have granted this interview because all three possess credentials that name them as privates in the Cularin Militia.

Fade in. Yara sits on one side of a broad, sparse stage. Her side is well lit, and she's trying her best to smile while continuing to look very serious. It's obviously pretty tough on her. The opposite side of the stage is not at all well lit, and we see three shapes seated in chairs. On the far left is a body with a very clearly Cerean head, to his left is a Human, and on the far right is a Trandoshan.

Yara: Mack, Pac, and Grunt. Three of Cularin's finest. Members of our Militia, defenders of our homes. Here today, with Yara, to anonymously dispute claims made by a great woman who's no longer alive to defend herself. Welcome, gentlemen.

Mack: Thanks. I think.

Yara: Let's get right down to business, shall we? Yara understands that the three of you would like to say something about the recently re-discovered expansion manifesto written by the great Reidi Artom, who, by the time she reached Cularin, had already visited twice the number of star systems most of us will see in a lifetime. Oh, and that you speak on behalf of the Cularin Militia.

Pac: Yara, if I may? I'm already noticing a pattern in your questions -- or rather, in your statements. Twice, you've referred to Reidi Artom as "great." We don't dispute that she was a very important person, or that without her, Cularin might not be what it is. You also seem to intimate that we are here to attack her in some form, when that is most certainly not the case.

Grunt: 'Cept for when she's wrong. Then she's pretty dumb.

Pac: Do be quiet.

Grunt: Sorry.

Pac: Where was I?

Yara: You were about to confirm for me that you're here to provide the Militia's perspective on what Reidi Artom had to say about expansion and war.

Mack: Not so much about expansion. See, most of that seemed okay to me. I mean, I only read that part of it once, so I guess it was okay.

Pac: Her opinions on expansion are largely irrelevant, as is her belief that war is a result of "fads." I'm not sure where she devised such a theory, but I find it bizarre in the extreme. War is the result of conflict, whether that conflict is natural or unnatural, and that conflict's unwanted escalation into violence. And I would like to add that we do not speak for the Militia as a whole. We speak for ourselves, as representatives of the Militia.

Yara: But since no one else from the Militia has spoken, that means you speak for the Militia as a whole -- doesn't it?

Grunt: Yeah. But only 'cause we're right.

Pac: I asked you once to be quiet. Please don't make me ask you again.

Grunt: Okay, don't ask. Can I talk about why Artom's dumb now?

Pac stands up, walks to the Trandoshan, and smacks him on top of the head. He then returns to his seat.

Grunt: Guess that's a "no."

Yara: So, the position of the Cularin Militia is that Reidi Artom was dumb.

Grunt: Yup.

Pac: Mack, smack him.

Mack backhands Grunt.

Grunt: Ow.

Pac: No, that's not the Militia's position at all. That's Grunt's position, but you must understand that Grunt is rather extreme in his perspective. He enjoys fighting with things. But he's not completely unrepresentative of the Militia, so he's here. Neither am I completely unrepresentative, nor is Mack. There is a great diversity of opinion within the Cularin Militia, and if you believe that any one of us speaks the literal "truth" of the Militia's opinion, you would be mistaken.

Yara: Right. So, Yara's a little confused. It's not the case that the Militia thinks the pending war with Thaere is a good thing?

Mack: Pending? You fuzzy-tailed little sand panther, you're the one who's been reporting the news! We're at war. Most of it's still out in space, or away from the civilian centers, but it's war all right. And of *course* the Militia thinks it's a good idea. If we didn't, we wouldn't be fighting!

Yara: So you do speak for the Militia as a whole, then.

Pac (resigned): Yes, I suppose. But only on that.

Grunt: Thaere bad. Can I say that? Thaere really bad.

Pac: Yes. That's fine.

Yara: I think we should get to the meat of this discussion, gentlemen.

Grunt: Meat? Mmm . . . meat.

Mack smacks Grunt. Grunt sighs.

Grunt: Thaere bad.

Yara: What in the manifesto do you find objectionable enough to come down here and request an interview on the network?

Mack: She never fought a war. I mean, all due respect, but she was good at exploring. She wasn't a warrior, so there's no way she could understand. War's a lot more complicated than what she made it out to be.

Yara: Specifically?

Mack: Like, she said there aren't any winners in war. But there are winners and losers about war as a whole, you know? Say you're standing outside a cantina and there's this guy who's hopped up on spice and Rodian ale and he wants to fight. Now, you don't have to fight, right? But if you do fight, by her logic, there's nobody who wins, because it's just violence. Say you don't fight, and the other guy, he just comes over and starts pounding on your face. If you don't fight, and he beats the goo out of you, he wins and you lose. There's a winner if somebody wants to fight and somebody else doesn't, and the winner's always the person who fights.

Yara: Some would claim that the person who didn't fight won the moral battle.

Pac: Moral battles hardly matter when losing means that one ends up a slave, or dead.

Mack: Yeah. What he said.

Grunt: Thaere bad.

Yara: So war is justified if someone else is attacking you.

Mack: Sure. I guess you could say that war for the sake of war is wrong, but who does that? You wouldn't catch Commander Dal'Nay or Commander Yurdel saying we should have war for no reason. You'd have to be pretty dumb to want war just because you can have it.

Yara: Interesting. What do you think about Artom's statement -- let me quote this to make sure I have it right -- that "the right to 'claim' a particular place is not a function of military power." That it's more a function of who was there first. Thoughts?

Pac: Naïve.

Mack: Unrealistic.

Grunt: Dumb.

Mack tries to smack Grunt, who catches his hand and puts it very gently back on the arm of Mack's chair.

Grunt (low, emphatic): Dumb.

Yara: Right. Any of you want to spend more than a single word -- or the same word, repeated twice -- addressing this question?

Pac: I think the word "naïve" sums it up fairly well. She speaks as though there is an original species for every place in the galaxy, and that species should be given primacy in determining who does and does not have a right to be in a place. Her language implies that there is sometimes -- perhaps not always -- a symbiotic relationship between a species and a place, and that this relationship should be respected by people who carry really big guns. But here's a news flash: People with really big guns don't care about symbiotic relationships and indigenous peoples. They don't care if someone was here before them. That's why we call them "invaders" -- because they come in somewhere they weren't invited and take it over. I speak for no one but myself, but I don't like war, and I signed up for the Militia to prevent war from happening, or, if it did happen, to be available to help defend my system. I don't like going to war, but I'll do it.

Yara: I think that's a good question to end on. Mack, Grunt -- we know why Pac signed up. What about you?

Mack: To defend Cularin. It's my home. I never liked Thaere, never trusted them, always thought they had some kind of plan we didn't know about. Looks like we were right. Of course, if you'd given me the chance, I'd've invaded them first. Take out Burnout, maybe some of their other stations. But that's not how it happened.

Yara: Interesting. Grunt?

Grunt looks at Pac, then Mack. He sighs.

Grunt: Thaere bad.

Yara: Right, that's what I thought. This is Yara Grugara, signing off, with special thanks to these anonymous representatives of the Cularin Militia for providing a counterpoint to a brilliant woman's insightful analysis of the horror of war. Good night, Cularin.

Fade out.

Home of Wisdom

In the Cularin forests is an honored dwelling known as the Home of Wisdom, where the Tarasin make decisions of the greatest importance. Now, irstat leaders gather at the Home to hear Mother Dariana's vision of a coming storm and "a great thing that must be done."

Among the trees of the Hiironi irstat is a dwelling woven from the strongest branches the Cularin forests can offer. This hut is clean and dry, well sheltered from the sweeping rains and the sheerest winds. The Tarasin honor this dwelling and speak of it only with the greatest reverence, calling it the "Home of Wisdom." They consider any conversation held in this hut to be sacred, any decisions made there to be mandates from Cularin itself.

Few outside the Tarasin tribes know this, but many of the decisions that have shaped their people have come from this tiny hovel of branch and straw. It was here that the Tarasin first decided to approach Reidi Artom, planned their rebellion against the forces of enslavement brought to them from the stars, and communally decided to accept the presence of outsiders on their world rather than go to war.

This small hut has been the focal point for many important events on Cularin, far more than the aliens who dwell on that planet realize. The decision made there today will also affect the fate of many, Tarasin and alien alike. The Force creates junctions in space and time, places where fate is decided for millions or billions through a chance meeting, an epic conflict, or -- in the case of the Home of Wisdom this day -- a dream and those enlightened enough to take it for

what it might mean.

They came in quietly, footpads brushing silently against the smooth back of the well-worn floor. The leaf flaps at the entrance swished closed behind them, letting in only a few stray beams of moonlight. They were high enough up that the dense canopy of the forest was mostly beneath them. Above lay the open stars and the infinite night sky. Silver light from outside was quickly overwhelmed by the rich gold of the hut's central fire and its leaping arcs of yellow and white.

"My thanks for coming. It has been a long run for most of you, so I will make this brief." Mother Dariana's voice shook with the weight of age, but she looked more vibrant now than she had in some time. Whatever she had to say must have been important to rouse her from the shelter of her sleeping den. The Mother did not call them often; when she did, they always came as quickly as they could.

Tonight was no exception. Some of them were still hissing slightly, their kampos flared to help shed the excess heat of their midnight run. Dariana's Keepers watched them all closely. The leaders of the irstats did not always get along, and gathering them so swiftly could only lead to flaring tempers. Mother Dariana's calming presence seemed to be keeping things under control, but each of them knew how quickly that could change.

"I have had a se'neth." Her words put an immediate hush to the murmuring in the room. A se'neth was not just any dream; the Mother would have called it by that name only if she believed it was a true vision. The power of the land was as strong in her as it had been in any Tarasin for as long as any could remember, but se'neth were rare, even for her. They always foretold great events. Leaning in close, the gathered tribal leaders eagerly waited for Dariana to share her vision.

"I have spoken of the storm to you before. I have seen it again, but this time I have watched the wind more carefully. The great storm will wash over us all, but I see now that it rages in the stars as well as in the sky. The dark storm clouds will reach our world, but they do not come from here."

This began the murmurs again. One young Tarasin female flushed a mottled blue and pink before asking quietly, "Can we stop the storm, Mother?"

The aged wise woman shook her head sadly. "No, my child. We can only hope

to survive it. But that is not why I called you here today. We must look to the future, and my se'neth has shown me a great thing that must be done."

That got all of the Tarasin's attention, and silence reigned in the Home of Wisdom. Everyone present, even the youngest and newest to their positions as community leaders, knew that if this had involved only their race, Dariana would have sent runners in the morning. No, this meeting was about something more. Something greater.

"These trees, and the great power that binds them and us to the land, will shelter us from the worst of the storm. Its terrible eye will fall over us soon, and there will be chaos, not calm, in its wake. Before this happens, we must prepare the way."

She fell silent again, and as the seconds slipped past, her Keepers feared she might have fallen asleep. Her great age and the events of the last few years weighed so heavily on her that her flesh grew weaker with each passing season. Just as her lead Keeper reached forth, one of the other irstat leaders spoke. "The way for what?"

She answered before the Keeper touched her. "For everyone."

Martial Arts

Despite the opinions of many, not everything in the Cularin system revolves around the Jedi. There are many movers and shakers among the worlds and asteroids here, some of whom have no affiliation with Almas, Coruscant, or any other world controlled by the "upholders of law" who wield the Force. Everyone from criminals with a vested interest in keeping Cularin free of the Thaere threat to legislators doing everything they can to ensure our safety exist in this system, and none of them wear robes . . . well, most of them don't.

He moved as quickly as he could to the landing bay. Traffic had been murder, almost literally. Another pile-up caused by an overturned OPS speeder and a handful of stunned and injured officers. Again, the WOLF had become active, and their spray-tint logos could be found on administrative and police buildings all over Gadrin. Who on Cularin were these "Wookiee Liberation Front" people, and just what in the cosmos did Wookiees even need to be liberated from in the first place?

Infuriated at the delay, he waved aside the security at the spaceport and moved with his entourage to the hangar indicated on his assistant's datapad. Even with the delay, he was not apparently late. *Thank the stars for small favors*, he murmured to himself as he waited below the extending ramp.

The ship beside Governor Chistor was a sleek model from one of the Outer Rim manufacturers. He did not recognize its make, but he knew what it likely cost. The fact that it carried several obvious weapons made him uncomfortable, but he had been assured of its peaceful intentions. Well, "peaceful" might not be the appropriate word, but the dignitaries aboard it were not here to harm Cularin. In Barnab's mind, that was the first piece of good news he had received all month.

The ramp came to a soft stop at the ground, and from within the shadowed portal at its top, several pale lights glimmered into existence. These were glow poles, five-foot rods of silver metal with incandescent spheres atop them, and they were borne by more than thirty children. The youths came slowly out of the transport, walking in two perfect lines. Between them, five robed figures -- each wearing a different color -- strode out gracefully.

Barnab Chistor waited patiently as the five Masters reached the bottom of the ramp and the children around them formed a perfect circle of light surrounding the gathering. He was not sure why these legendary people were here on Cularin, but he was determined to make them feel welcome. He raised one hand in a sign of greeting and spoke clearly, "Cularin welcomes you, as do I, Barnab Chistor, Governor of this world."

The Master in White walked forward two steps and nodded slightly. Inside the cowl of his robe, the figure's face could be glimpsed slightly. Barnab was startled to see the man's extremely pale skin and eyes the shade of bright, fresh blood, but his years of diplomatic experience helped him cover the reaction quickly.

"We accept your greeting and return it. The Five Masters will be staying here until we decide to leave again. Has our academy been prepared strictly by the instructions given to you, Chistor of Cularin?"

Barnab nodded quickly. "Your message was quite clear," he said as the entire delegation turned and began walking towards the exit of the spaceport. The children around them kept perfect pace, moving the ring of glow poles exactly

circular as they walked. It was like a pale halo surrounding them at all times; Barnab found it both unsettling and oddly soothing at the same time.

The children broke formation only when the group reached the large speeders waiting for them. They filed into the vehicles six at a time in perfect unison. Behind them, each of the Masters also boarded, until only one was left to stand beside Barnab on the walkway. This time, the Master was a woman, and by the way her violet hood peaked around her brow, Barnab guessed she was a Zabrak. "You have questions?" she asked impassively.

He nodded as they climbed into his personal speeder and pulled away from the port. "Yes. Why have you come here? You are, of course, welcome. It is a great honor to have the Five Masters on Cularin, and you are welcome to stay --"

She raised a purple gloved hand and interrupted him. "We do not need to stand on pleasantries. I will answer your question on the condition that you speak to no one of what I tell you." Her golden-yellow eyes glittered in the shadow of her hood, and he was suddenly struck by how beautiful she was. He agreed with a simple nod.

"This place has been gifted with a special energy. Cularin has been removed from time and returned, but time -- like energy -- cannot be created or destroyed. We study energy and motion, both of which this system has in unique abundance. Until we learn what we want to know, we will not leave."

He thought about her answer for several minutes, and by the time he looked up again, the city of Gadrin was long gone. They were in the jungle now, heading toward the distant building constructed to the Master's exact specifications and on the precise spot they had requested. He had many more questions, such as how they had secured the Tarasin's permission to use that land or where the materials to build their new home had come from, but only one was pressing enough for him to ask now.

"Why an academy? Surely teaching will only distract you from your investigation."

The Zabrak woman looked ahead, staring into the trees speeding by as if the green blurs held the answer to his inquiry. "Teaching your people is part of our investigation. The energy I speak of pervades you and has become part of your minds, bodies, and souls. We must see how it has affected you and how it will affect us."

As she spoke, Barnab saw the faint lines of a tattoo on her face. It was very subtle, but he recognized it as the mark borne by those following the K'thri style of Martial Arts. This Zabrak was the K'thri Master, then. He had studied all the lore on the Five Masters he could find after receiving their communication four months ago, but nothing in his files had listed which style each Master represented.

His thoughts carried him until the speeder came to a slow stop. They were at the crystal and steel building the Masters had instructed him to construct. The contractors had done an admirable job, which was not surprising given how much they had been paid. It was a majestic edifice, rising three stories into the sky and spired all around with shafts of gleaming glass.

Behind him, the Masters had left their speeders and were examining the building as well. He could see that one of them, the Master robed in Green, was obviously a Wookiee, which probably suggested that he was the Master of Wrruushi. The Master in Black was shorter than the others and completely hidden by his robes. Barnab caught himself staring at them until they and the children had gone inside -- all except for the Zabrak.

She stood nearby, looking back at him intently. "We will begin seeing prospective students now. We have chosen only one to begin training. The rest will have to prove themselves."

Barnab nodded and stared moving toward his speeder. "I understand. I will take word of this back to --" He was interrupted again, this time by a firm hand on his shoulder. The Zabrak had closed the distance between them breathtakingly fast.

"Students may not leave until given permission by their chosen Master. Your assistant can send word back to your people. You must remain here until I am satisfied with your progress. Come along, learner Chistor." And with that, she turned and quietly flowed up the cut crystal steps of the Five Masters Academy.

The Hunt Begins

Aggressors stalk the worlds of the Cularin system. These hunters are silent, deadly, and completely without mercy. They are unseen by the people of the planets they prowl, appearing only to their chosen prey and then only long

enough to make their kill. Dispatched by an unseen power for a single purpose, they stalk, slay, and disappear without a trace.

Not even their quarry remains behind. Where these hunters pass, they leave only wreckage, signs of a struggle, and unanswered questions in their wake. For months they have been here, but only recently have they been given the command to proceed with their hunt. Their shadow master has spoken.

Kill the Jedi. Kill them all.

Only her Jedi training saved her from unconsciousness or worse when the back of her swoop burst into flames. She leaped clear of the hurtling vehicle just before it impacted a wall and exploded. Tumbling to escape the shockwave, she hit the ground hard and rolled into the nearest alley. Shaken but not badly injured, she stood up and looked around. The shadows of Hedrett at night were thick. She could see the lights of Cantina Row at one end of the alley, but that was the direction from which she had come; she did not dare head back that way.

She tried to get her comlink to work again, but the signal was still dead. Almas had to be warned. If she could not get a message off by herself, she would have to use civilian equipment. There had to be a comtower around here somewhere. Her datapad was still down, too, so she could not use a map. Without guidance, she was done for, so she took a chance and leaned into the shadows to use the Force.

In her mind's eye, the young Padawan saw a rolling tide of darkness closing in on her. Fighting back her mounting fear, she pushed past these shadow clouds and searched for her goal -- a communications array she could use to warn Almas of what her master had learned. Her master . . . She tried to suppress the terrible sadness and loss that suddenly flooded her mind at the thought of him. Her mind needed to be clear if her Farsight was to work. Any emotion would darken the Force and make it impossible to see.

Her meditation began to work. The images of her master's sudden death disappeared. There would be time to mourn his loss later. Right now, she needed what was becoming clear to her, a tall metal tower with a transmitter a few blocks away. That would suffice to send her warning. Now to get there and --

A clap of thunder and a shock of pain roused her from her vision. The alley wall a meter from her head was smoldering, and tiny pieces of shattered stone had sprayed her face and arm. They had found her! Before their next shots could land more accurately, she ignited her lightsaber and blocked the incoming fire. Too shaken to send the blaster shots back at her hunters, she opted instead for a Force-assisted jump to take her out of the alley and onto a nearby rooftop.

From there, it was only a dozen buildings or so to the transmitter. She could see it in the distance, lit up from below with the gaudy yellow and red lights of a vid-cast station. The station's listeners would have to tolerate a little down airtime; this was Jedi business. What she had to tell Almas might be the most important Jedi business in the history of Cularin. Two Padawans and her master had already lost their lives over it.

She jumped from rooftop to rooftop, the Force propelling her farther than muscle alone could. On the sixth building, she paused long enough to look back. The skyline of Hedrett was a row of shadows in the thin moonlight, uninterrupted save for the arcs of light from the industrial starport guiding transports in from orbit. She would need to make her way there and get off-planet as soon as she sent her message. Cularin was no longer safe for her. It was not safe for any Jedi now.

She turned around and started to run again. She had taken only a few steps when a burst of blaster fire lit up the rooftop ahead. A lone figure was briefly illuminated in the red glow of its weapon, and then the bolts of light tore through the air toward her. She barely had time to ignite her 'saber before they reached her. The first three were parried cleanly, but the surprise of the attack let the fourth get through and slam into her forearm.

Pain shot through her hand, and her lightsaber fell to the ground, sputtering and fading as it dropped. The figure flew into the air, a pair of rocket plumes trailing behind as it closed the distance in a heartbeat. She summoned the Force in desperation and slammed the flying shape as hard as she could, but it was not enough to keep her opponent away. Picking up her 'saber with her good hand as quickly as she could, the Padawan rose up just in time to block a powerful overhead strike from a dark metal blade.

The figure was right on her now, not that she could see it clearly. The bright light of the blaster bolts and the blue glow of her own lightsaber made it hard

to make out her silhouetted attacker. She had not seen any of them clearly, nor had any of the others before they had been killed. Whoever -- or whatever -- these hunters were, they had been impossible to shake and seemingly immune to the Force. She tried to affect her foe's mind again, but there was nothing there. It was like reaching into a void.

Mindless or not, the armored hunter had great skill. It was everything she could do to block its masterful strokes. Strangely, the curved weapon in its gauntleted hands was not being cut apart by contact with her lightsaber. Stranger still was the faint singing hum the blade made as it arced through the air with each swing. It was almost hypnotic . . .

With a frantic push of the Force, she managed to drive her foe back and clear an escape path. As her attacker smashed into the wall of a rooftop shed nearby, she ran as quickly as she could for the next building. There were only two more to go before she reached the transmitter. Even if it cost her life, Almas had to know about these Jedi hunters and, more importantly, where they came from.

At the height of her last jump, she felt something sinuous wrap around her just before a pulse of electricity shocked her into agonized near-unconsciousness. She plummeted forty feet to the hard street below, only meters away from the vid-cast station. She was only dimly aware of being dragged out of the street by a cable attached to her bindings. Then, in the darkness, there was the faint song of a humming blade as it descended, followed by a mercifully brief flash of pain.

A Mother's Memoirs, Continued

Some time ago, Mother Dariana of the Hiironi released a portion of her memoirs. She spoke about life and the Force, and she revealed that even one so revered as she had come close to walking the path to darkness. Not, of course, that Mother Dariana seemed to think of herself as revered. If anything, her creaking voice made her sound tired, weary from the burdens she's chosen (or been chosen) to carry throughout her life. For a time, her health faded far enough that many thought she might be preparing to become one with the Force. That time, however, has not yet come. In this recording, Mother Dariana again speaks about her life, offering lessons she has attempted to learn and speculating on how they might relate to recent goings-on in her home system.

Tell me when I should begin. The box you bring here has so many lights that my old eyes are near blinded, and all of them flash at once, and if I had grown up with such things they might not befuddle me quite so much. But I did not, and so I can sit and stare at them, marveling that the Force is in these things, as it is in all things, and yet I cannot see how they work. There are threads of light, connections between your machines and your body, between your machines and my body, but for all that, they do not speak to me.

It is on, then? I suppose I shall begin.

In preparing for these sessions, I always think to myself, "Imagine that you will be speaking to your children." I've spoken to my children for years uncounted, and there is no better feeling for me than to sit atop a cushion, look out at the faces surrounding me, waiting for me to speak, waiting for the conversation to be renewed. There is a moment of expectation, a tension that twists the air -- a pleasant twisting, mind you, as one might get at the anticipation of meeting a lover after long months apart -- and it is in that moment that the ties that bind us all, one to another, are strongest. The truth of communication is found not in the words we speak, but in the silence that precedes and follows our words.

That would be my theme, I suppose. We must listen to the silence. Listen.

If I pause, then -- if I seem to be waiting for someone else to speak -- it is not simply because of my years. The pauses in the great conversation of the sentients, the spaces that exist when words are left unsaid, tell us as much about the speaker and the listener as do the words themselves. Often more.

She takes a deep breath, and exhales slowly with a wheezing chuckle. For several seconds, she doesn't speak, merely breathes.

What occupies the silence? The vastness of untapped potential, the empty space between worlds in which we live when we speak to one another? Think, during the pauses. Ponder what you are imagining, and why. Let your mind be free, and discover what it is that we are not saying, what it is that we are not considering. Consider the emptiness.

This is a lesson it seems we all need to be reminded of. Even I, for all the words I use to say that we must be vigilant, for all the warnings I might have offered about threats and darkness and the evil that must exist within each of us, in order to give the goodness of our actions meaning. I must be reminded that it

is what I have not said that reveals the most about me. It is what you hear in the words I do not say that reveals the most about you.

Before you mistake me for a rambling old crone, allow me to share a story. In the spring of my nineteenth summer, I met a Human female wandering my jungles.

I thought of them as "my" jungles, you see, because I could not imagine anyone other than a Tarasin laying claim to them. Perhaps the kilassin or the mulissiki might have a legitimate claim, if only the creatures chose to exercise it, if only they had the force of mind to realize their potential. Each of us possesses the potential for greatness, after all. It is what comes of being alive.

I met this Human in the jungle, and she met me, and our eyes communicated lifetimes of information before either of us opened our mouths. I looked at her and saw someone older than myself, but by how much I could not say. She had long hair the color of Morasil at dusk, which she wore pulled back in a braid that flicked back and forth over her sweat-streaked neck. Her eyes were the color of horonna leaves -- calm, pale green, and very soothing. I found her clothing strange -- my kind do not, after all, generally wear long breeches or shirts with sleeves that reach to our wrists during the hottest part of the day -- and I found the blasters she wore on each hip more than a little discomfiting.

I can only imagine what I must have looked like to her. A primitive, wrapped in a shawl, carrying a short spear, wandering the jungle. A threat? I had a spear. She, two blasters. But life had shown me already that those who do not know your ways may take any action for hostility, and those who respond most quickly to perceived threats of violence are those who carry the most violence in their own hearts. Which made things more than a little awkward for me, as I struggled to initiate communication with her while not frightening her so much that she might attack.

At the same time, though, I did not want to let the silence end. Because every moment we did not speak, I learned more about her. The way she shifted her weight from right foot to left, the way her too-rapid blinking betrayed her fear of me, the way her eyes flashed to the trees above my head, as though a great flying kilassin might swoop down on my command, snatch her up, and make a meal of her.

Through this, there was also calm. She was wary, but something in her kept the wariness from bearing her down with its weight. She smelled of confidence,

but not arrogance. She felt fear -- and perhaps I flatter myself that it might have been due to my presence, when she might have been nervous about the jungle itself, which was clearly not her native environment -- and yet, she didn't allow herself to be controlled by it. She recognized the fear and moved past it, keeping pace with the moment. Fearing me or the jungle wouldn't help her if the fear blinded her to a real danger. So she continued to search. After a time, I spoke.

"I am Dariana, of the Hiironi."

She made a small bow, a gesture I find even more amusing now, looking back on it, than I did at the time. And at the time, I almost laughed out loud. Bowing? To me? Clearly, this must be an off-worlder. No one from Cularin would bother bowing to a young Tarasin woman of no means and barely any name of her own.

"I am a Traveler."

I waited. There had to be more. But there wasn't. And when she spoke the word, I heard it capitalized. Not just a traveler. A Traveler. As though there were nothing else she could be, nothing else that made sense for her. A word that defined her. So much, in a single word. It told me everything about her, but also told me nothing at all. What I learned of her came more from what she did not say than from what she did.

Then she turned and walked back into the trees, and I continued on my way, and Cularin continued to spin through the galaxy.

I had considered telling this story without returning to a "lesson." It always seems trite, to me, to come back to the beginning of a story in order to tell the listener what it is she should have learned, because doing so limits the listener. If I tell you what you need to know, then you will not choose your own lesson, you will not follow your own path. You will instead find yourself tied to the path I have chosen for you, and this may not be the best path, or even a good path, but it is certainly not *your* path. It is mine.

So saying this, I will tell you my path, my lesson, what I take away from this story.

In the galaxy, there is much more apparent emptiness than wholeness. There is the vastness of space, dotted with rocks and gravity-bound spheres of liquid

flame. But the emptiness is not empty. It never has been. And when we begin to assume its emptiness is also its truth, when we assume that the pauses in the conversation bear no meaning, that is when the things that live in the dark begin to hold sway over us. They stand in the dark, and we do not see them, and then they are among us. Because we have assumed that those we did not hear never spoke. Because we have assumed that those we did not see were never present.

There is more to this galaxy than what we see and what we hear. There is more to an individual than the words she speaks. The lessons of history that we must be most careful to heed are the lessons that were not written down, were not recorded. The voices we cannot hear are the ones whose warnings are shouted the loudest of all.

Listen. They are calling to Cularin.

Merr-Sonn

The starport in Hedrett is used mostly for commercial transport. It does not have the same level of facilities for interstellar travelers as other ports, and while private ships are docked there, most individuals use the much more elaborate and luxurious travel center in Gadrin. The smaller, less "refined" port in Hedrett is well supplied for industrial and cargo transporting, making it the stop of choice for business trawlers, commercial transports, and merchandise of many different levels of legality.

The Office of Peace and Security, the recognized and bonded police force for Cularin, is well aware of the contraband that comes in and out of Hedrett on a daily basis. The worst of these shipments are stopped regularly, but other items get through quite frequently. Some manage to avoid OPS, while others are eased through their passage by the exchange of a few credits or favors done in the shadows. It's the way business is done everywhere in the galaxy, and just another day on Cularin . . .

Rezzo had to sidestep quickly as the crate came trundling down the conveyor and nearly crashed right where he was standing. "Hey, watch it up there! You trying to kill me?" His antennae swiveled forward angrily. Even for a Rodian, he had a short temper, and this was the third "accident" on this trip alone. He was starting to get more paranoid than usual.

"You not watching where you are going is not my fault!" came the brusque answer from his partner above. There were days when their ship, the Vor'Teth, just wasn't large enough for both Rezzo and Drossh, the big Trandoshan hurling cargo crates down the loading chute. As Rezzo dodged a second case, he decided this was one of those days.

"Look, Dro! You want to unload the ship by yourself? You're gonna crush me under one of these things if you don't slow down!"

A noncommittal grunt was his only answer, but the next crate came down at normal speed. It was good enough for Rezzo; he had been partnered with Drossh for five years now, and the scaly wretch had never apologized for anything in all that time. He was beginning to think Trando did not have a word for "sorry." If his experience was any indication, Trando did not have words for "bath" or "table manners," either.

An hour later, they were finished, and Drossh was down on the landing platform with Rezzo. They looked over the huge stack of crates and estimated their take off this run. "We can finally get the port side fresher fixed, Dro. You won't have to share mine any more." From the look of relief on the grim-faced Trandoshan, he was obviously as relived as Rezzo with that concept. "So, what do you think we were hauling?"

Drossh shrugged and hefted a spanner, pointing to one of the crates. His intention was obvious, but it always made Rezzo nervous. "I don't know, Dro. The contract didn't say not to open them, but I prefer not to know. I mean, what if there's something really illegal in there? The kind of thing that, if we saw it, we would get shot for –"

The sound of a retaining bolt sheering off cut his sentence short. Rezzo snarled in frustration at his partner, who was already tearing off the second one from a crate. "Do you ever listen to a word I say?" The second bolt coming off answered him eloquently enough.

Curiosity got the better of Rezzo, and he came closer to get a look at whatever was inside the crate. Drossh popped the latch, opening it to reveal a black metal folding rack with a digital control on one side. Rezzo groaned. This was a bad idea, but there was no turning back now. He reached out, punched the extend button on the rack, and moved back.

The crate lurched slightly as the rack began to unfold, extending upward on well-oiled servos. In a few seconds, the rack was fully deployed and stood two full meters over the case itself. It contained more than a dozen weapons, each one factory new and still covered in transport wrapping.

"Frell," Rezzo said in quiet amazement. "These are fragging nice guns, Dro." He looked around, but his partner was not beside him any more. He was over by another case, opening it quickly. "Dro!"

It was too late. The second case was open, and another rack extended up out of its depths. "You big idiot! Our buyers are going to be extremely shrapped if they show up and we've busted open every crate! Now close that box!" His antennae were practically vibrating as he stormed over to the Trandosha, one hand pulled back to smack some sense into the reptilian lug.

Drosch took down the biggest weapon from the rack and pulled the wrapping off it, much to the protest of his approaching partner. The weapon was a large firing tube with a case-mounted clip and a tracking scope on one side. By the look in the Trandosha's eyes, it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He punched a button on the side of the gun, again to the loud protests of Rezzo, and ignored the feeble impact of his partner's little green hand on his thick, scaled arm.

The button caused the display of the weapon's tracking module to light up, but Drosch could not see what it said because the gun suddenly jerked out of his hands. Rezzo shook his head and put the big weapon back on the rack, chastising him for playing with it in the first place. Upset now, Drosch pushed his partner out of the way and took the gun back down. "Oh, no you don't!" came the Rodian's reply, and long emerald fingers wrapped around the weapon, trying desperately to wrench it free of his stronger grasp.

In the midst of their struggle, one of them hit another button on the gun. The display went completely red, and a plume of smoke vented from the side of the barrel. The weapon kicked once, and a rocket fired into the depths of the crate at their feet. Rezzo and Drosch had just enough time to look at each other and shout, "Frell!"

The Office of Peace and Security, Hedrett Precinct, would like to assure citizens that last week's detonation of Bays 13 and 14 of the Hedrett Public Transport Facility was in no way a terrorist act or related to the mounting tensions between planetary government and the Thaerean Navy. This was an isolated

incident, and current investigation indicates it to be the result of negligence on the part of one or more now-deceased transport personnel.

Numerous items found on the scene of the accident have yet to be claimed. In the interest of getting the facility up and running once again, OPS has decided to place what cargo could be salvaged on sale at Tesker's Auction House in the warehouse district, sector 6, in Hedrett. Interested parties can pick up data lists of the goods in question at Tesker's, at any OPS facility in the Cularin system, and through the Cularin intra-net.

Swoop and Dive

Hello, friends. This is Yara Grugara, reporting for Cularin Central Broadcasting. Over the past few months, Yara has done a lot of very serious pieces for the network. That's good. Serious is good. Because the galaxy is a serious place, and Yara is a serious woman. But there is a time and a place for seriousness, and if anyone knows that you can't be serious all the time, it's Yara. Plus, her producers seem to think Yara is getting a little bit self-important. What do they know, though? If they were so brilliant, they would be in front of the holorecorders.

So today, Yara has scheduled an interview with a newcomer to the Cularin system, a gentleman named Kerd K'Kerren. Many of you may be familiar with Kerd's daring exploits. From his humble beginnings as a Podracer in the Outer Rim, Kerd has traveled the galaxy. He's flown for every major race team, from SoroSuub to the Hutt Racing Program, and has turned down more sponsorships than Master Lanius has turned down interview requests from yours truly -- which says something. He's won races on Tatooine, Coruscant, and over three dozen other worlds, and has never finished lower than second when his racer hasn't experienced "mechanical problems." Now he's come to Cularin, and it's Yara's duty to find out why. Welcome to the studio, Kerd K'Kerren.

There is a smattering of applause from off-camera, sounding like it comes from stage hands and other minor functionaries on the CCB set. As the applause dies down, a young man saunters onto the set and grins in the direction of the camera. He wears a skin-tight suit of rancor hide trimmed with white and brown fur. Enormous black boots rise to mid-thigh, where they seem to be

strapped in place with steel bands. The only flesh visible on his body is on his hands, neck, and face, and every inch of skin is covered in intricate green and gold tattoos, including the left side of his head, which is completely shaved and tattooed with swirls and checks. The right side of his head seems to have sprouted a shock of hair the color and texture of late summer grass. A single horn -- very much like an Iktotchi's -- curves down from his left temple and ends inches from his mouth. A small microphone is mounted on the tip of the horn, which clearly isn't something he was born with, but is just as clearly permanently attached to his head. He turns toward one of the cameras that isn't currently active, spreads his arms, and grins.

Kerd: Hello, Koooooooooooo-larin!

Yara: Kerd? That camera.

She points. Kerd turns toward the camera that's active, grins even more broadly, and spreads his arms again.

Kerd: Welcome to Koooooooooooo-larin!

Yara: I think that's my line, Kerd.

Kerd sits. He shimmies in his seat, seeming to dance to music that only he hears, then reaches up and adjusts the mic on the end of his horn.

Kerd: Nah. It's mine. No doubt about it. Welcome to Koooooooooooo-larin! Got a nice ring to it, don't you think?

Yara: Except for the fact that it's pronounced kew-lar-in, not koo-lar-in, I suppose it does.

Kerd: I scoff. Hah! Wanna see?

He twists his face into a half-smirk, pulling the left side of his upper lip almost all the way up to his nose and squinting his right eye most of the way shut.

Kerd: That's scoffing, sweetmeat.

Yara: Excuse me?

Kerd: Scoffing. You know, expressing derision, in this case for information I really didn't want or need. Like, how to mispronounce Koooooooooooo-larin,

when it's so much, well, cooler to pronounce it the way the Kerd-man does! You know, you're kind of hot. What's your number?

Yara: "The Kerd-man"? You can't be serious.

Kerd: Nah. You've seen my scoffing face. That wasn't it. I'm all serious now. This is the Kerd-man, and you're all welcome to Kooooooooo-larin! You may have called it something else before, but now that I'm here -- it's just that much kooooooooo-ler!

Yara licks her lips, adjusts the notes in front of her, and forces a smile.

Yara: We were rather like backwater savages before you arrived, Kerd-man. Can I call you Kerd-man?

Kerd: You bet. What's your number?

Yara: So tell me, Kerd-man, what is it that brought you to Cularin?

Kerd: Well, I'll tell you, sweetmeat --

Yara: Sorry. Sorry to interrupt. Would you please not refer to Yara in that manner? It makes her uncomfortable.

Kerd: Shyeah. Sure. Who's Yara, and what should I call her instead?

Yara: I am Yara, you -- I mean, I'm Yara. And you can call me Yara.

Kerd: Cool. Where can I call you?

Yara: You were going to tell me what it is that brought the Kerd-man to Cularin.

Kerd: Whoa. Denied. Right, so why is the Kerd-man here? A couple reasons. One, I heard that Kooooooooo-larin's got some eye-twisting Podrace action going on, with big sponsorship opportunities. You got your little-people Cartel, and that's nice. It's good to give funny-looking types something to do every once in a while, so throw the little guys a bone. That's what I always say. So they got control of your trade, and that's all special and stuff. Good deal. But they also got a lot of credits, which is, like, way beyond what you ought to do for little folks like that. Because they don't know what to do with it. But then they, like, go out and build Podrace tracks, and things get wild. So, that's cool.

Yara: I don't think I understood a word you just said.

Kerd: You're not very bright, are you?

Yara: At least I can count to two. That wasn't two reasons why you came to Cularin. It was either one, or eleven. But it wasn't two.

Kerd: Heh. Whoa. Okay, it can't be eleven, since you've still got your shoes on, so the counting can't have got that high. So it must be one. Which I guess means the other reason the Kerd-man came to Koooooooo-larin is this war thing. You heard about that?

Yara: Yes, we're aware of it.

Kerd: It make you nervous?

Yara: I think wars make everyone nervous.

Kerd: Ever want to find a man to cuddle up with and make all the scariness go away?

Yara (deep breath): First, "nervous" and "scared" aren't the same thing. Second -- sure. We all need to be held.

Kerd (grinning): You need a man. What's your number?

Yara (too sweetly): I'll give it to the first real man I meet.

Kerd: Whoa. Denied again.

Yara: So, you're here in Cularin to hide from the war. How heroic of you.

Kerd: Hey, now. The Kerd-man's a pilot, not a warrior. You ever see what's left of a ship after it gets unloaded on with a bunch of fire-linked turbolasers, maybe some photon torpedoes? I tell you, s'not much. Just little bits of dust and scraps of metal and goop that kind of heads off into space until it hits something with an atmosphere and burns up, and that's the end of it, nothing left of you but whatever hasn't hit an atmosphere yet, but the galaxy's only so big, and sooner or later, all your little goopy bits are gonna hit something or another. Nah, Kerd-man just flies the Pods. That's all he wants and all he needs.

Yara: I see from your list of sponsors that you once flew for the Hutts. What was that like?

Kerd: Oh, sweet little baby, let me tell you! You've never *flown* until you've flown Hutt Air! It's like, they bring you in and say, "Oota goota boota froota," and you're like, "Huh?" and they're like, "Oota goota boota *froota*." And you're like, "Um, okay." And then there's all these hot femmes around, and most of them even have all their pieces still, and you got the hottest ship in the galaxy, and the guys that are working on it used to work at places like Sluis Van until they got picked up in the wrong place at the wrong time and started working for the Hutts to pay off some debts. So everything you want's right there.

Yara: Was there a particular Hutt you flew for?

Kerd: Nah. It's not like that. Jabba and me talked a few times, but can I tell you something?

Yara (deadpan): I'm breathless with anticipation.

Kerd: That guy's gross! I'm standing there talking to him and he picks up this slimy critter with long, floppy legs out of a vat by his little podium or whatever it is he sits on. Then he pops it in his mouth, but he's so fat, he can't even close his mouth fast, so the thing about crawls out before Jabba's mouth pops down and *splat*! I got reptile guts all down my shirt, and one of the thing's legs is stuck to the ceiling.

Yara: Fascinating. So I understand that you've never come in lower than second in any race where you haven't experienced technical malfunctions. True?

Kerd: You best believe. I fly like nobody's business. Nobody outflies Kerd K'Kerren. Nobody! This one time, on Tatooine, there was this little kid who took out Sebulba in a race. Just a runty guy, and Sebulba -- well, he used to be pretty cool. And everybody made a big deal about this kid. I don't even remember his name. He doesn't race any more -- one of those child-star types. He's probably in some gutter on some nowhere world now, sucking on his last deathstick. It always happens. Anyway, this kid, he just ran Sebulba *over*, and everyone was like, Man, this kid is great. But what no one knows is, I was scheduled to race that day. Just didn't. Had engine trouble. Some droid dropped a hydrosponder in my outflow. So I didn't race, Sebulba lost, and nobody knows I would've won.

Yara: So you have a lot of technical malfunctions, then?

Kerd: A lot? I don't know about a lot. Everybody has some. It's racing.

Yara: Right. I have some statistics. I'm going to share them with our viewers at home. It looks like you've entered over 700 races in the past decade. Does that sound about right?

Kerd: Yeah, I guess. Give or take.

Yara: Of those 700, you've won 50, and come in second in another 82. That sound right?

Kerd: You better believe it, beautiful. You're looking at a top-shelf winner. None better. You know you want to give the Kerd-man your number. Right?

Yara: Funny you should mention numbers, Kerd-man. Because based on what I just said, you've come in first or second in 132 races out of around 700 you've entered.

Kerd: Yeah. So?

Yara: So you also told us that every race in which you haven't come in first or second, it's been because of mechanical problems.

Kerd (finally catching on): Yeah?

Yara: Oh, it just seems like 568 mechanical problems is a lot, that's all. You ever consider getting a new mechanic?

Kerd: The Kerd-man does all his own work!

Yara: Right. Like I said, you ever consider getting a new mechanic?

Kerd: Hey, the Kerd-man doesn't have to sit here and take this abuse -- not when the Kerd-man's finally here in Koooooooo-larin! Everything's different now, people. Welcome to Koooooooo-larin! Welcome to Koooooooo-larin! The Kerd-man's here! Welcome to Koooooooooooo --

The screen goes blank. We hear "larin!" followed by a sharp smack and an indignant "Ow!" Silence. Then Yara appears. She's on a different set, dressed differently, and her smile is no longer quite so forced.

There you have it, race fans. Kerd K'Kerren has come to Cularin. Recent reports indicate that he's looking to obtain the sponsorship of the Metatheran Cartel. Until such time as a major Podrace occurs, though, when we can all see the Kerd-man's mechanical skills in action, you can find him at this address.

An address for a hotel on Tolea Biqua scrolls across the bottom of the screen.

And on behalf of everyone in the system, I suppose it's kind of my duty. So, Kerd-man, welcome to Cularin. May your stay be as long as it has to be.

Insecurities

When dignitaries visit Cularin, the details are often left to a personal entourage or officials in the government to work out. There are times when such channels are insufficient to the risk implicit in the dignitary's arrival, however. When such incidents occur, there are people on every world who make it their business to iron out any complications, make all the necessary arrangements and -- when necessary -- handle whatever troubleshooting is required.

On occasion, "troubleshooting" involves both halves of the word . . .

"Would you quit that? You are making me nervous."

Warlan looked back at Gibbs, still pacing despite the request. "You nervous? I'm the one who's bantha fodder if anything happens to the Senator during her visit." His left hand kept drifting to his hip, a centimeter closer to its silverhorn grip with each pass. He was obviously worried about the security arrangements, but that was no great surprise. Warlan Tosk was *always* worried about something. It was his job.

"Would it help to go over the layout of the building one more time?" Gibbs was trying to calm the man down, even though he knew it was a lost cause. People like Warlan Tosk were never calm while they were on duty. "You need to relax," he told Warlan, knowing exactly what the pacing man would say in return.

"I'll relax when Senator Wren is back in her transport and out of Cularin space." Warlan walked from the edge of the table Gibbs was sitting at and strode quickly to the door of the room. After a bit of mental math, he muttered, "Eleven meters to the conference table." Then he did the same from the table to the room's only window. "Can we lose the window?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Not unless you want to let the media into the room," he said dryly, "and you don't." He took another sip of his Jawa juice, grimacing at the bitter taste. It was better than the rank stuff the convention center usually served, but only in the same way that processed sewage was better than raw waste.

Warlan nodded emphatically. "You're right about that. Okay, the Press will need the window, but we can at least install another sheet of transparisteel, yes?"

Gibbs groaned. "We have one on the outside already. I don't think we have the budget for a second one." He made a show of checking his datapad, but he already knew the answer. "No. We can't add another layer on such short notice."

"Frell, that's not good. I suppose we'll have to manage with an observer in the room watching for a weapon at the window and a droid scanning for targeting signals. That'll do, I suppose. Now, about the emergency exit; who has access?"

Gibbs went back to his datapad. "Governor Chistor, though I don't think he is back from his negotiations with the Five Masters. The Senator and her delegation, of course, and the two of us. No one else can get past the retina scan, and we've installed the thermoscanner, though I have no idea why."

Warlan stopped at the window, peeking out of it like there was a gang riot just outside. His hand was fully on his weapon now, though it was still holstered. Gibbs looked at him like he was a madman, but he was too polite to say so. "Because retina scanners without thermograph scanners can be fooled if the eye is removed from the socket." His serious look left no doubt in Gibbs' mind that Warlan had seen that done before.

"Okay. That's a little intense." Gibbs went back to his drink, noting with an inner chuckle that Warlan was walking the floor like he had already downed a dozen cups already. "Are you sure you are from Alderaan?"

That stopped the pacing for a moment. "Yes, quite sure." Then, with a puzzled tone, "Why?"

Gibbs shrugged. "You just don't seem all that 'centered,' you know? Everyone I have ever met from Alderaan is calm and quiet. *You* are . . ." -- Gibbs chose his next word as tactfully as he could -- "not."

Just then, Warlan spun around and his pistol seemed to materialize in his hand. A shot rang out, high over Gibbs' head. Before he could even blink, there was a shriek and something heavy hit the ground. Warlan was already moving to it, blaster trained on the smoldering corpse, before Gibbs could turn around and register what had just happened.

"Congratulations. You just killed a big rat." Gibbs' tone was a little breathless despite the sarcasm. Dead rat or not, that was very, very fast.

Warlan shook his head and turned the fur-covered body over with his foot, never aiming his blaster at anything but the creature's head. "It's a veshet, a relative of the Tatooine womp rat. Indigenous to planets like Dathomir, they can be trained to attack on command or by remote through olfactory cues."

Gibbs shook his head. "It looks like a big rat to me. You really think someone put that in here to kill Senator Wren when it *smelled* her?"

Warlan nodded severely. "Yes, I do. Head to the City Office and see what you can do about getting me another division of OPS officers for the meeting. I am also invoking the Koru Act and requisitioning funds from the Senator's account." He stepped back from the blackened vermin and gestured to the window. "I want that second pane of transparisteel in an hour."

"Seems like a lot of trouble over a dead rat, but okay." Gibbs headed out, grabbing his cup on the way to the door. He would need all the wake-up fuel on Muunilinst just to get through this night . . .

Ten minutes later, Gibbs stepped onto a side street and flashed a personal light. The signal was answered after a few seconds, and a figure slipped out of the shadows. Wearing a body suit of night black, the newcomer was definitely Human, but none of her facial features were visible. "Report," she said, without a trace of emotion.

Gibbs answered in kind. "We have to abort. The security operative will not be fooled, and he is too competent to make a mistake. The veshet is dead and cannot be replaced quickly enough. I estimate the bodyguard is not bribable, and he will not leave the venue until after the meeting."

The shape nodded affirmatively. "Recommendation?"

Gibbs, his face as cold as stone, answered quickly. "We should let this meeting go as scheduled. I can maintain this disguise until after the target has left Cularin. I will rendezvous with you at the ship, and we can follow our quarry back to Coruscant. We will have ample opportunity to try again at a later date."

"Understood." And with that, the figure disappeared again into the depths of the alley. Gibbs turned around, and his entire demeanor became Human again. With a deep sigh, he started walking back to the convention center. The target was safe for now, but that kind of luck would not hold out forever.

Jungle Warfare

A survivor of the Tarasin revolution discusses what it was like the last time war came to Cularin. His meandering reflections offer insights into what it might be like to fight in the planet's dense jungles.

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Nobody asked for my opinion, and I can't say I care that they didn't. Sometimes, you go through life knowing you've seen something important. You know that something you've experienced is going to make a difference. You remember your lessons, but nobody cares that you remember them. Nobody knows that you ever learned them at all.

If I were a proud individual, it might bother me. I'm not. I've got no use for pride. Talk to other Tarasin sometime -- we males, we have no real need for ego. At least, us old ones. Anyone raised in a society where the females are in charge -- in word as well as in deed -- never learns the same unhealthy pride and ego that leads males of other species so easily into war. This is not to say that we do not understand war, just that we do not define ourselves by it. It is something to be done, when it must be done.

These things, they are related. Nobody has asked me for my opinion, because they do not think that an old Tarasin male like me would have an opinion worth knowing. Particularly when it comes to matters like war.

It is funny to me, that those who call Cularin "home" so easily forget her history. When has Cularin seen war before? When the Tarasin stood up to off-worlders and fought them through the jungles. They came upon us, and we came among them, and the roots of the great trees were fed the blood of martyrs and fools.

One day, I hope to learn the difference.

The act of war is not foreign to us. We are not so backward and technologically inept as to be incapable of defending ourselves. I find myself shaking my head in wonder as we are ignored, looked upon as needy, ignorant creatures, and "protected" from a galaxy we have chosen to shun. I myself understand war. I also have strong opinions about it, having fought in the Tarasin uprising. Nobody asked me my opinions, and though I am far from offended by this, it seems to me that the current situation demands knowledge of how war may best be waged in the jungles of Cularin. So I put forward this document, which contains what little I know, in the hopes that lives may be spared through the wise use of the tactical advantages offered by our jungles. My remarks will have a number of themes, which, roughly stated, are these: be of the jungle; follow the rain; and do not destroy.

What does it mean to be of the jungle? Some might take this for a nativist conceit that only those who were born in the jungles of Cularin can fight effectively in them. This is not the case. Those who were not born of the jungle can still wage war among the trees, but to do so, they must understand the interconnectedness of all things.

You will be saying to yourself, "This is the point where the old Tarasin begins to speak of the Force."

The Force. Pah. I don't know what I feel in my sa'tosin sometimes, but others call it the Force. I feel no need to give it a name. It is life. It is the way in which we connect one to another, and another, and the way we connect to our galaxy. To the rocks. To the trees. Your Jedi talk of it as a mystical energy field. What is a "mystical energy field"? It sounds to me like something they cannot explain, so they use many words to try to explain it, but in the end, they explain nothing. I do not believe in the Force. I believe in life. I can see life. It grows and blossoms and is beautiful beyond all things. It is birth and death, it is joy and pain. I do not need a "mystical energy field" to explain what I see before my eyes.

So when I say that to be of the jungle is to understand the interrelatedness of all things, I mean just that. What is done in one place, at one time, affects what is experienced at a different place, in a different time. Blast a great greenbark tree on the jungle's edge outside Gadrin, and the fish in a stream on the far side of Cloud Mountain may die. Why? Because when the great greenbark tree dies, it falls. Its roots are torn from the ground. A nest of juru ants is upended, spilling them into the midst of a pack of mulissiki. The ants bite, the mulissiki spray, and the ants die. The ants would have helped to fertilize the noroobo flowers, which would have fed the birds whose droppings provide nutrients that those distant fish count on to live. But the spoor is poor, and the fish are not fed, and they die. Because of the birds, because of the flowers, because of the mulissiki, because of the ants, because of the tree, because of the blast. Or it might be that the birds eat the wrong thing, and their spoor becomes toxic to the fish, or what have you. It doesn't matter precisely how the change happens, it is simply a matter of understanding that a small change in one part of the jungle may bring about a large change elsewhere. Or no change at all.

Once you understand this, you begin to become of the jungle. A change in the jungle effects a change in you. You notice these changes. The wind shifts, and the smells are strange. Metallic. Oily. Or the horonna leaves at shoulder height shake with the wind, when the wind usually blows much higher. Why is the wind blowing so low? The emmosi lizards climb the western side of the trees -- why would they do that? They never climb that side unless they are trying to escape a predator. Are you the predator? Or is there another danger?

It helps, to be Tarasin, to see these things. An army that fights in the jungles of Cularin without Tarasin to aid its cause is doomed to fail. But it is not only Tarasin who can be of the jungle. Anyone who seeks, who strives to understand, can come to these conclusions. Can begin to see what the jungle hides from those who are less aware.

Following the rain is as simple as it sounds and as complicated as you might imagine. Following the rain before one is of the jungle is dangerous. If you are not of the jungle, the rain is a hindrance. An annoyance. A danger. It is something to be avoided, because the feet do not step with confidence, and even the best-tuned weapons may misfire. Tracks that might have been clear minutes before become sloppy divots and skids, and leaves bent by the passage of enemies now bend down as the rain beats them groundward. Everything changes, and the eyes that do not know the jungle for what it is,

that do not belong to someone who is part of the jungle, will not see through the changes.

It is in the best interest of those who are of the jungle, then, to follow the rain. It provides every tactical advantage. Let the off-worlders rely on their sensors and weapons and minds that are so attuned to their technologies. Let them huddle beneath shelters out of the rain, or slog through puddles and slide down muddy, root-gnarled embankments without the slightest hint as to how their actions affect everything around them. The rain is to the advantage of the defender in Cularin's jungles. Follow the rain, because everything you do becomes easier when the water drips from the long, slick green leaves and trickles through the shallow layer of twisty moss along the trunk of the great trees. Everything you do becomes easier, and everything your enemy does becomes more difficult.

My final word of advice on how to fight in the jungles of Cularin is this: Do not destroy. There are better ways to fight a war, and there are worse ways to fight a war. But the war will end, eventually, and you must consider what will be left when the war is over. What is left of the world for which you fought?

The downfall of any invader is the idea that the victory must be achieved at any price, that the world must be taken no matter what. But you cannot take a world if you do not understand it, and to take a jungle world, you must understand that with destruction, the world is no more. Even a few trees may make an enormous difference in the world, if they are destroyed for no reason. The truly dangerous invader is the one who wishes to take a world, to hold it, to nurture it to his own end. But this was not the case with the off-worlders we rose against, and it is not the case with the enemies we face now.

If we destroy, though, we become no better than the invaders. Remain of the jungle. Respect every creature and every plant that lives within it. Love them. If you love the place you defend, that place will love you. It will defend you. Do not destroy, and you will not be destroyed.

As to your enemies -- them, you may destroy. Blast them. Cut them. Kill them if they will not leave. But if you set them on fire, be certain to put them out before they harm a single flower.

I post this because Cularin needs to understand the kind of battle the Tarasin believe must be fought. Some Tarasin -- well-intentioned as they may be -- will tell you not to fight.

If this is your home, though, there can be no choice. Fight for your home. Fight knowing that you are right.

Political Platforms

As conflict mounts on Cularin, a meeting of the citizenry of Gadrin and Hedrett is convened. Initially, all is chaos. Then, several prominent individuals make themselves heard, including: Karid Blakken; Counselor Westa Impeveri's current aide-de-camp, a Sakiyan named Brug D'Shar; Governor Barnab Chistor of Gadrin; a Tarasin who calls herself Kaguya; Vanster Enan, Ithorian owner of the "Sop House" chain of cantinas on Cularin; and Mirt, a Bothan who claims to have immigrated from Thaere. These six, for a variety of reasons, were called to the front of the meeting to address their concerns. The moderator for the event is none other than Yara Grugara.

Yara: If I could have your attention please. Your attention?

She pauses, looking out at the crowd gathered in one of the big empty hangars of the Hedrett groundport. The crowd, restless from whatever discussion has gone before, continues to simmer as Yara waits. Slowly, the murmur settles to a sustained (if barely perceptible) communal whisper.

Yara: Thank you. I think that you'll all agree that the previous form of our dialogue really wasn't getting us anywhere. Yara -- and everyone on this makeshift stage, which frankly looks like it's going to fall down at any moment - - thanks you. What we'd like to do is allow the half-dozen individuals who seemed to have so much to say that none of the rest of you could get a word in to discuss things in a more civilized environment. That's the idea, at least. Plus, with Yara as a moderator, we know that there will at least be someone else speaking from time to time.

Voice from crowd: How about someone else shutting up, every once in a while?

The communal whisper rises in volume and then settles back once more to its dull baseline.

Yara: I'm not interested in talking, actually. The panel has much more to say on this than Yara. So, the topic: How important are the platform cities to Cularin, and what should be done with them?

She takes a seat to one side of the front of the stage, folding her hands in her lap. For several seconds, the six panelists who are seated in uncomfortable metal chairs at a long table look at one another, then at the audience.

Blakken: Right. If nobody else is going to say it, I will. The platform cities are a drain on the economy and a problem for the planet. We should pull out of the jungles and not disturb anything else.

A smattering of applause. The Tarasin panelist nods her head, but doesn't speak.

D'Shar: Mr. Blakken is clearly confused. From a logistical perspective, there is no way to do as he suggests. Cularin is simply too populous for any kind of withdrawal from the platform cities to be practical, and if he had any legitimate experience in Cularin politics, he would know this.

Blakken: Legitimate experience? I'm not the one who helped engineer a fraudulent election, wampa-breath!

D'Shar holds up his hands and shakes his head, a classic gesture of "Heard it all before."

Blakken: Look, I'm not here to talk about how *his* boss lied, cheated, and stole to obtain office. I'm past the point where I care. Counselor Impeveri's done a reasonable job since he took office, and I had no intention of bringing up the fraud when I sat down here. But if someone else wants to make an issue of it to distract us from the matter at hand, well, I can't be held responsible.

More than a little applause from the audience. It seems that Blakken -- the last individual to challenge Impeveri for the counsellorship -- still has some supporters on Cularin.

Chistor: I think the points Mr. Blakken and Mr. D'Shar make both have merit, which only makes the dilemma more of a challenge.

D'Shar: Both have merit? If you can't take a stand, you are a mealy-tongued politician who has nothing whatsoever to contribute to the discussion. To be perfectly blunt -- shut up.

Chistor: I will not. I said that both have merit, not that both are right. Counselor Impeveri's hiring skills seem to have deteriorated significantly if he's

chosen you as his mouthpiece. No, don't bother trying to respond, my friend. I'm going to make my point, and then you can say what you will. The argument that the platform cities are a drain on Cularin's economy is a valid one. No platform, early in its existence, is self-sufficient. The amount of traffic into and out of any city of reasonable size is such that they can either be profitable or well supplied. Not both. The point of building cities on platforms was that we could expand settlements on Cularin without damaging the natural beauty of the planet.

D'Shar rolls his eyes. The others watch Chistor as though hoping he may eventually say something interesting.

Chistor: The problem is that our attempts at being environmentally friendly are a drain on the land-bound settlements. I don't believe that Mr. D'Shar would disagree with me that Gadrin and Hedrett both shoulder some amount of burden to keep the platform cities operational. This groundport, for example, handles better than one-third of all the cargo traffic destined for the platforms.

D'Shar: Which means that the land-bound settlements, as you call them, actually benefit economically from the presence of the platform cities.

Chistor: That's both the counter-argument to my position *and* the best defense for my position. Yes, there is more traffic through Gadrin and Hedrett in order to supply the platform cities. But there is also a drain on our resources. The shippers and traders who come to Cularin only to drop off goods for the platform cities ultimately contribute little to the economy of our two cities, aside from landing fees and fuel costs.

Vanster Enan: I must respectfully disagree with Governor Chistor. My cantinas attest to the fact that these pilots do more than stop and fuel their ships. They fuel themselves as well! Double-dip Outer-Rim rumdrops! Yes, that is what they come to our cities for, and I tell you, they spend credits with us! My business would be decimated if we cut out the trade to the platform cities.

A weak chorus of "Hear, hear!" from the crowd.

D'Shar: There you have it. How can you continue to argue that the platform cities are bad for the economy?

Chistor: Because there is no evidence that taking away the trade to the platform cities would have the slightest effect on anyone's business. I don't say

this to call Master Enan's word into question, but it does seem to me that he is speculating -- and perhaps engaging in a bit of hyperbole. "Decimated" seems rather strong. Still, I will grant that there are benefits as well, but those benefits are not nearly so great as they would be if, say, there were tariffs levied on goods that pass through Gadrin and Hedrett bound for the platform cities.

This seems to stop D'Shar in his tracks. He reaches into a pocket, pulls out a datapad, and types a quick message. Seconds later, the datapad clicks and beeps. D'Shar returns it to his pocket.

D'Shar: Ah. So it isn't necessarily that the platform cities hurt the economy, only that they do not provide the maximum possible benefit to the economy?

Chistor (glancing at the pocket where D'Shar's datapad now hides): Does your employer see a difference?

Blakken: Now I see why I lost that election. I'm not slimy enough.

D'Shar smiles. Before he can respond, Kaguya speaks.

Kaguya: I believe there are other important matters that relate to the platform cities. We must consider the impact they have on the animal and vegetable life on Cularin.

Mirt: Oh, muffle it, you bark-lover.

Some portion of the audience chuckles.

Kaguya: I will not. Someone must speak for the Tarasin. The platform cities are an encroachment on our home. The elder generation decided they were a good compromise when the off-worlders could be held back no longer, but the elder generation has been mistaken before. We are told that the platforms are minimally invasive. What does minimally invasive mean? It means that they sink enormous posts into the ground, in holes fifty meters deep, cutting through roots and good soil and destroying life, and then they put a platform above the trees, to block the light of the suns. This may not be bad for the economy, but this is bad for Cularin.

Mirt: Freak.

Kaguya: Go back to Thaere! Go shave the nerf-fur off your chin!

Yara: Could we keep this civil, please?

Mirt and Kaguya: No!

Kaguya: You are uncivilized and smell funny.

Mirt: You're a backward reptile.

Kaguya: You are strange and off-putting.

Mirt: You don't even write your own material, do you? A backward reptile from a backward world that can't even tell when it's being invaded.

This earns Mirt a round of "Boos" from the crowd, who seem increasingly agitated by him. He seems completely unconcerned.

Mirt: You want to talk problems with your platform cities? How about this? They provide a dozen different places for ships to land on your planet without having to pass through anything remotely like customs. How about the fact that you've had Thaereian military on your planet for years, coming and going as they please with no controls because they never needed to go through your major population centers? You let them come in and set up shop, and now we're all paying.

Nervous silence.

Chistor: That is regrettable.

D'Shar: Very.

Kaguya: Which leaves us needing to decide what to do about the platform cities. I say we dismantle them. We put the people of Cularin to work dismantling the platforms, and if we need platforms, we build levels upon levels in Gadrin and Hedrett. Why do you live in two-story cities, when the rest of the galaxy lives on thousand-story planets? Think of all the jobs that would be created by the dismantling of the platforms and the building of the new levels!

Mirt: I think the lizard's got an idea there.

Vanster Enan: Will I need different permits for different levels?

Blakken: Making things more complex is not the way to fix this situation. We should pull out of the jungles and if there isn't room on Cularin, people should go elsewhere. You can always build another city on Genarius. You can't re-build a jungle. More complexity and technology on a world like Cularin is only going to lead to trouble. The Bothan was right the first time -- we're creating problems for ourselves and for future generations.

D'Shar: You still have no knowledge of politics. I will take this discussion back to Counselor Impeveri.

Chistor: Perhaps a referendum is in order.

The Duel

Once again, the wandering eye returns to Almas, where the towers of the stone academy of the Jedi reach up to the stars like the fingers of a grasping hand. This analogy is not inappropriate. Against this backdrop, hundreds of students from many species have struggled to find and break through their limits, all of them reaching to better their grasp of the universe.

The Almas Academy has often fallen under scrutiny for its unorthodox methods. It accepts Padawans as adults. It takes in those tainted by the dark side and trusts them to overcome its shadow. It even allows its Jedi to seek their own path in the Cularin system rather than insisting that they follow the academy's mandates. These methods have drawn criticism and attack over the years, but Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk has guided the institution with a steady hand, secure in the belief that his way is the right one.

"Many are the flaws of the Jedi," say some of the Council on Coruscant. "They are prideful and too sure of themselves." Master Qel-Bertuk might be one of those they speak of, but his belief has guided the lives of many heroes. If he works from pride, then perhaps pride, mixed with wisdom, can still lead to something great.

With her many hands, E1-6RA set down two plates, a bowl, and a cup of steaming dark liquid on the stone desk in front of her. The droid's head swiveled silently, looking around the office for any sign of her master. Once again, he was not present, as he should have been for meal time. Prepared for this, E1 opened several collapsible plastic memory domes and set them over

the repast. Moving away gracefully, the droid chattered to herself, speculating about what her master might have been doing. She didn't understand organics, especially her often-illogical master, Lanius.

Nearby, Master Lanius's actions confirmed E1-6RA's suspicions. His lightsaber arced upward to clash with the sudden thrust from his sparring partner. The two energy blades locked for a moment as their beams tried violently to combine, sparked angrily, and blazed with light. Blue on purple, the radiance silhouetted Lanius and Darrus in the heart of the darkened fighting hall.

Normally, the hall was filled with students either practicing or seated in its many carved chairs. Master Devan ran a tight ship where her lightsaber combat classes were concerned. Under her steady care, students learned the fine art of defending themselves and others. Anyone not observing or working through techniques wasn't allowed in the hall at all.

Today, however, the hall had been reserved by Master Jeht. He had asked Lanius and Devan to join him so he could evaluate their performance with a blade. Though Devan assumed that Master Lanius would decline, she was pleasantly surprised to see him in attendance as she arrived. She stood in the arched doorway of the room for a moment, watching them fight.

It was a brilliant dance of light and shadow. Both Masters were experts with a lightsaber; that much was evident almost before Devan began to study their techniques. As they slashed and parried, she observed how they conserved their energy -- nothing but clean lines of attack and defense. Lanius was as impressive as always, his brown robes swirling as he wove a glowing web of energy around himself to ward off the incoming blows of his opponent. None of Master Jeht's attacks came close to connecting with him.

Just then, Lanius stepped back and turned off his lightsaber. Darrus immediately pulled his own weapon back, turned it off, and stood at the ready. "Sir?"

"I have no desire to continue this duel if you insist on holding back, Master Jeht." Lanius looked annoyed, though not overly so, as he started to return his saber to the wide leather belt around his waist. "I am missing a meal for this, and I do not wish to be scolded by my droid for no good reason."

Darrus nodded and re-ignited his blade. Its violet light washed over his face as he raised it in salute. "My apologies, sir. I wanted to evaluate your skills, and I was afraid I could not do that if the contest ended too quickly."

Lanius chuckled. "Oh, really? I don't think so." His weapon leaped off his belt and into his hand of its own accord, hissing to life. "Ready to fight me with everything you have now?"

A quick nod was the only reply. It was enough. Lanius launched himself into the duel, and a moment later, he was on the ground, his saber thrown across the room, a long shaft of purple light angled down toward his throat.

Devan blinked. It had happened so quickly that even her Jedi perception had difficulty following the action.

Master Qel-Bertuk, still gasping from the kick to his stomach, looked up the humming blade at Darrus into his utterly black eyes. "I stand corrected." Then he added, with a wry smile, "That is, if I am allowed to stand again."

The lightsaber flickered into darkness as Darrus helped Lanius to his feet. "I am sorry, sir. It was not proper of me to introduce physical attacks into the duel. I will refrain from that in the future."

Lanius walked over and picked up his lightsaber, and then gestured for Devan - still standing in the archway -- to enter. "Not a concern, Master Jeht. I asked you to give me all you had. You did. I see nothing to apologize for." He clicked the weapon onto his belt again. "Perhaps Devan here will be more of a challenge for you."

Darrus nodded, and life flared into his lightsaber again. "The other reason I was holding back was because she had not arrived yet. With your permission, sir, I would like to begin the evaluation now."

Lanius and Devan looked first at each other, and then at the black-robed Jedi in the middle of the training hall. "But you just definitely finished with me," said Lanius. "Do you mean to test Master Devan next?"

Devan shrugged out of her over-robe and hefted her unlit lightsaber with a sure and steady hand.

Darrus shook his head. "No, sir. I mean to begin the evaluation of you both. If you come to either side of the circle, we can begin."

Devan scoffed. "Master Jeht, you overextend yourself. I commend your skill, but surely you do not mean to take on both of us at once? One weapon against two is not a fair contest." She moved as she spoke, however, shadowing Lanius as he stepped to Darrus's far left side.

Master Jeht nodded. "I agree." He reached out to the pile of robes he'd shed before entering the circle with Master Qel-Bertuk. There was a rustle of silk as something hurtled toward him. The finely wrapped hilt of a long, curved metal blade slapped hard into his gloved hand. Its scabbard slid off gracefully and returned to the pile, revealing a midnight-colored sword with a slightly waved temper line down its edge. A soft echo sounded down its length, a whisper of a song that filled the fighting hall with a faint, almost subliminal, melody.

Devan's eyes widened as Darrus pointed the beautiful weapon at her chest. She could see his face through the stained glass panels of its cross guard, a disc in the shape of a blazing comet chasing its own tail. Nodding acceptance to the challenge, she gave life to her lightsaber and moved forward cautiously. On Darrus's other side, Lanius followed her lead and together, they attacked.

Metatheran Promise

Hello, joyous people of Cularin! It is I, the very personification of kindness and gentility that you know and love as Thurm Loogg, and I am once again on your video screens when you may not have expected to see me. Is it not a pleasant surprise? I am here for you, when you did not even ask me to be here! It is as if it were meant to be, do you not think so?

After my last broadcast, there was much discussion of whether the generous and gracious Metatheran Cartel should interrupt your viewing schedules once more with our messages of peace and goodwill. It seems that many of you were angered by the abrupt termination of whatever broadcast you were watching the last time, and that a great many downloads of pictures of myself were interrupted, much to the dismay of all who provide such images. I must warn you, however, that not all of the pictures of the frolicsome Thurm Loogg that you find on your holonet are authentic. For instance, the one in which

Thurm Loogg appears to be in the process of courting a rancor -- this is not a real picture! Strange as it may seem, I have never actually had dinner with a rancor. I am told their table manners are such that any occasion that requires formal attire is probably inappropriate for them, and as I would never dream of eating dinner in anything less than formal attire, I do not generally dine with rancors.

Not that there is anything wrong with rancors, of course.

I must also regretfully inform you that the very popular image of the effulgent Thurm Loogg dressed as a Twi'lek dancing girl is not authentic. While the ceremonial lekku attached to my head are, in fact, ceremonial lekku attached to my head, it is the case that my head was removed from my body and attached to the body of a lithe young Twi'lek.

Only in the picture, of course! It would be very uncomfortable, not to mention medically impossible, to actually remove my head and place it on another body. But what a laugh I had when I saw the picture for the first time! I must have laughed for minutes and minutes at the wonderful ingenuity of the people of Cularin. If only you spent as much time planning how to defend yourselves from invaders as you do playing with images of your friends from the Cartel, you might not get invaded so much.

That is a joke! We at the Cartel are very much aware of how much time you spend defending yourselves from invaders. We are certain that Cularin, under the leadership of a woman who lives on Coruscant and with the military guidance of a traitor and a Gungan, must certainly be prepared for every exigency, and that you cannot possibly worry about the outcome of the Clone Wars, much less more immediate threats to your health and well-being!

At that point, my advisors tell me, the probability of any given individual in Cularin turning off their viewscreens or datapads was approximately 82 percent. This is why we bought time on every network in Cularin at once! We of the Cartel do not wish to interfere illegally in your lives. Goodness, no! Illegality is bad! We do not want to be illegal! If we are going to interfere in your lives, we will do it the way the galaxy demands.

We will buy our way in, just like everyone else.

You may be asking yourself, "Why did my viewscreen turn itself back on after I shut it down? Too much of a good thing can be dangerous! Why, as much as I

love Thurm Loogg -- because I know how much the Cartel loves me, and all of Cularin -- I do not know how much I can watch of him. It is so much like taking a lick of sugar, then another, and finally pouring the entire bag of sugar in my mouth because it tastes so good, I just cannot stop. This is what Thurm Loogg is like to me! I know this, and so I turned my viewscreen off, and yet, it is on again! Why, oh why?"

To this, I say -- surprise, Cularin! What you did not know about much of your technology is that over the last few years, we have been providing complimentary upgrades to your software! All of your software now functions much more smoothly and efficiently than ever before, all free of charge, courtesy of the omnibenevolent Metatheran Cartel! And one of the things our upgrades allows us to do is to turn your viewscreens and datapads back on when you turn them off by accident! Aren't you excited? Cartel programmers are working hard to make all of your software run smoothly -- especially the software we did not create!

We recommend that you not attempt to modify our modifications to your software, however. Some of you are very proprietary about such things, but the Cartel understands what is best for you. You must trust us! Besides, if you attempt to modify our software and fail, the hardware being controlled will explode immediately, doing much damage to your face and neck.

This is also a joke! We do not want to explode anything in your face that you would not explode in ours.

Isn't it wonderful, being in such a symbiotic relationship?

Now, why is Thurm Loogg, the only non-Jedi ever offered a seat on the illustrious Jedi Council, the only individual actively courted by both the Loyalist and Separatist camps, the true brains behind the Clone Army that will save all of the Republic from certain destruction, speaking to Cularin today? Because it is important that he do so, of course! And because there have been rumblings of discontent throughout Cularin, which we hope to quell, with regard to the Metatheran Cartel.

Sad to say, there are those who still do not trust the Cartel. I do not understand! It has been three years since my foolish-and-well-dead predecessor ordered the cutting of the ch'hala grove on Cularin -- three years! The good-hearted Cartel blasted our own base out of existence to prove our sorrow at my predecessor's actions, we graciously donated a ship to Cularin's

defenses, we created secret bases on Tilnes and -- er, that is -- was -- our only base, and it was created to establish a defensive perimeter to assist in keeping Cularin safe, and what response do we get?

You love us! Even from here, in my secret transmission station, I can hear you shouting it at the top of your lungs. "We love you, Thurm Loogg! We love you!"

Admittedly, not all of you love us. But most of you see how much the Cartel loves you, and accept us as the friends we know ourselves to be. Everywhere we go, we are greeted with smiles and gratitude! It is wonderful to be of the Cartel. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.

What my most fortuitous and compassionate self would most like to say to you, Cularin, is that while the Cartel is in Cularin, you need not fear any threats from outside your system. We will make things better! Just by being here, the Cartel offers you safety and security. How can you not feel safe and secure, knowing the Cartel is close by?

I know, it is hard to imagine not feeling safe in your homes. Which is why we haven't left! We are not going to leave you, Cularin. The Cartel loves you! We do. And so we will stay, and stay, and stay, risking our lives as your fighters and those of the bad nasty Thaereians -- with whom the Cartel does not, of course, do business, because they are bad and nasty and not at all the kind of individuals the Cartel prefers to deal with -- blast one another into space dust.

Oh, and such explosions! I was watching footage of a battle recently, and I found it interesting that your fighters explode green, and the Thaereian fighters explode red. Isn't that strange? It's like watching celebratory explosions at a coronation!

One moment. I do not think I meant to say that. My teleprompter is behaving curiously. Hello? Who is on the teleprompter? Is it Max again? Hello, is it Max? Max, have I not told you that we do not liken the wholesale slaughter of species to coronations? How many times must I make this clear? You know what this means, don't you, Max? That's right. Max no longer gets a monthly bonus check, at least until next month. Bad Max! I hope you will remember next time!

Where was I? Ah, yes. I was speaking of the glorious defense of Cularin, and the role the Metatheran Cartel will play in this defense.

We have thought long and hard about how to assist in defending Cularin. How can we show Cularin how much the Cartel loves it? How?

Then it came to me, one evening after a meal that was likely much too spicy and upset my stomachs to no end. The best way to help Cularin is to stay out of the way!

That is right, Cularin. The Cartel loves you so much that we are not going to provide you with assistance in defending yourselves. We know that you take much pride in being able to defend yourselves, having spent many years with Thaere looking over your collective shoulders and gathering information about how to suppress any pitiful resistance you might mount. We know! And we respect your desire to not ask for help, since if you had asked for help against the Thaereians long before the great war started, you would have received it, and would not now have the problems you do. So, you must not want help! It is so clear to us!

So the Cartel will respect your wishes. You may go on and fight your little war, and the Cartel will stay out of the way. We will not insult your pride and dignity by fighting your war for you, since we would win it too easily! Where would be the fun in that? The people of Cularin love to fight, and now, you are fighting someone else, and the Cartel is very happy.

For you.

We are very happy *for you*! That is what I meant to say, except that my prompter stopped. Max just lost dessert privileges for the week as well, didn't he?

So, that is our promise to you, Cularin. We will not interfere to help you win this war that you clearly want to win. We will not, because the Cartel loves you! Remember that always!

Droid Rights

By San Herrera and Nia Reston

(as transcribed by Morrie Mullins from a short paper sent as a press release to every news agency and government office in the Cularin system)

San Herrera and Nia Reston, the young Force adepts who previously seemed obsessed with death and worked to provide "aid" to the Tarasin, have a new cause. They argue that droids have rights, just like everyone else, and should be respected -- and set free.

Thesis

We suggest that droids have rights, by virtue of being sentient beings. Too long have droids labored for those whose only claim to superiority is the ability to fit circuit boards together, weld a chassis, or install power cells. A droid, once completed, is a sentient being with goals and desires of its own, and should be treated as such. In this paper, we explore the notion that droids have historically been mistreated, that their basic rights as sentient beings have been perpetually subjugated by organic species, and that unless a paradigmatic shift occurs in how we consider droids, we will find ourselves in danger of violating the very will of the Force.

Argument

First, a note on language. In common usage, a "droid" is any mechanical construction that demonstrates some amount of decision-making capacity and which is created in order to serve the organic species of the galaxy. The term "droid" is, in our minds, derogatory and demeaning, as it reduces the variety of mechanical individuals who work throughout the galaxy into a single named class, without regard for the beauty and uniqueness each offers. Because of the offense we take at the labeling of these individuals as "droids," for the purposes of this paper we will refer to all such individuals as "synthetic people" or "synthetic persons." Thus, we recognize their inherent individuality while still acknowledging the general lack of carbon-based organic systems that most of our species share in common.

The plight of the synthetic person is one that begins far back in the annals of galactic history. The earliest records of synthetic people show that they were created as a servant class on worlds that believed themselves to be too refined to support slavery. Early synthetic people were little more than boxes designed to process information and provide feedback to their "masters" -- the title quickly adopted by those who either built or bought these synthetic people.

In less than a century, the first fully functional, free-range synthetic people began to be employed in various agricultural settings. The hottest deserts, the

coldest poles, the most dangerous jungles -- organic individuals sent their synthetic people into these dangerous environments to do what the organics would not or could not do themselves. Many synthetic people perished, destroyed by the elements or ripped apart by predators. When this happened, their "masters" did not mourn their loss, but simply went out and bought more.

Over the course of countless years, the systematic abuse of synthetic people has become common practice. These individuals provide significant inputs to the functioning of the galaxy on almost every level, but are not afforded the same basic freedoms the organic citizens of the galaxy enjoy. They are, in a word, slaves, and in a galaxy where slavery is outlawed in all but the most outlying, lawless systems, this smacks of the highest form of hypocrisy. We believe ourselves to be "better" than slavers, to be more concerned about the fundamental rights of individuals, but we are so indolent, so pampered, that we still cannot do the work ourselves. So we create machines with the capacity to think and set them to the tasks we do not wish to do, never considering that when these machines gained the capacity to reason, they also gained the capacity to hurt.

We spoke once with a synthetic person who was serving as a "protocol droid" on Coruscant. (We find it ironic that we even have synthetic people for protocol. Is there anything the synthetic person is *not* expected to do? Must we really create a class of synthetic people whose purpose is to make sure that we eat with the right fork and bow appropriately when meeting dignitaries from other planets?) This synthetic person's actual assignment was watching a trio of rambunctious children who seemed to delight in abusing their metallic companion. After a particularly unpleasant-looking tumble down a set of stairs, the synthetic person picked himself up and began making minor repairs to his torso. Every few seconds, he made a small adjustment, and then twitched. His eyes blinked green, then gold, then green again, and he sighed.

We spoke with the synthetic person (his designation is not included herein, for fear that his masters might erase his memory – or worse), and he informed us that this was, in fact, a standard day on the job. When asked if it hurt to fall down the stairs, he seemed genuinely surprised by the question. "Comfort," he told us, "is not an issue. I am uncomfortable, but it allows me to look forward to a hot oil-bath in the evening, after my wonderful charges have been put to bed. This is what I do. I fall down stairs, and I allow myself to be kicked, hit, beaten upon with hammers, partially dismantled, and subjected to various

other indignities. I do this so that my master does not have to suffer in these same situations. It is much better that I do so, because if I have an unpleasant experience, I can have it erased from my memory, while my master would have to live with that experience for all time. As such, one might say that droids are made to suffer -- it's our lot in life."

It is clear, even from this brief conversation, that synthetic people *do* hurt, that they *do* experience discomfort, and that they recognize that this discomfort falls to them because they are *less important than* their masters. They are created to endure the things that organics cannot or would prefer not to endure. They recognize their status as servants and, because of their programming, feel powerless to change it. So their solution to their pain is to erase their own memories -- to destroy the continuity of their lives. It is more important to serve the master than to have their own identities. This is what they have been taught, or at least programmed to believe.

This pattern is so ingrained today that war rages in the galaxy with one side of the battlefield made up largely of synthetic people. Ironically, the opposing force is largely an organic form of the synthetic person, a mass-produced "clone" army that was created for the sole purpose of waging war. The argument could be made that the current war actually pits one form of synthetic person against another, with relatively few free-willed organics risking their lives (aside from the Jedi, of course). While this might be overstating the case slightly, we suggest that it is reflective of the larger galactic problem of failing to recognize the rights of every sentient creature to exist in the way that it finds the most meaningful and fulfilling.

As things stand, we are no better than Hutts. We start wars, but we do not fight wars. We order synthetic people to do all our dangerous work, and then we sit back and watch. If they succeed, we prosper. If they fail, we purchase more synthetic people. If we win a war fought by synthetic people, what have we really won? This question in its basic form doesn't change whether we consider "droids," "clones," or both to be synthetic people. No matter which side prevails, the war will have been won by armies lacking free will, which we suggest creates a dangerous precedent. If soldiers can fight without free will, without any control over their own life-or-death struggle, what does this mean for the rest of the galaxy? What does this mean for the common person on Cularin, Coruscant, or anywhere else?

These questions are, in some respects, metapolitical. We would like to close with a set of recommendations and a call for a more in-depth understanding of how a lack of compliance with these recommendations may cause us to diverge from the will of the Force.

Recommendation 1: All synthetic people shall immediately be freed, and any claim of "ownership" denounced by those who currently call themselves "master." To do less than this is to violate the basic premise that all sentient beings are part of the vast, interrelated whole that is the Force.

Recommendation 2: Ownership of synthetic people shall be outlawed in any star system that claims loyalty to the Republic and which remains bound by the decisions of the Galactic Senate. Any individual who wishes to employ a synthetic person should pay that synthetic person at a rate equivalent to that of an organic worker with the same knowledge and skill set. Again, because of the interrelatedness of all things, this is the only way to adhere to the precepts of the light side of the Force.

Recommendation 3: Any situation deemed too dangerous for an organic creature shall likewise be viewed as too dangerous for a synthetic person, and thus avoided. Any synthetic person who agrees to engage in particularly dangerous activities should receive hazard pay. We recommend that such pay be at least twice that individual's standard wages.

Recommendation 4: Memory wipes without the express written consent of a synthetic person shall be made illegal and shall be punishable as if the individual performing the wipe had just performed involuntary neurosurgery on a self-aware organic individual. Our past is all that we are, and to violate that is to remove some portion of an individual's essential connection to the Force.

Conclusion

There are many perspectives on the nature of "life," some of which are implicit in our arguments. We accept that some in the galaxy will not agree with our assumptions or our assessment of the situation. However, we can no longer stand idly by while an entire class of sentient beings is systematically enslaved by a society that professes to be above slavery.

If we are truly above slavery, then we have only one choice: We must recognize the rights of synthetic people, and free them. Free them now!

Double Cross

Things are never quiet in the Cularin system. Smugglers cross between its worlds, pirates lurk amid the spinning rocks of its asteroid belt, and shadows move when no one is watching. It is a busy time, both for the system's natives and for those just passing through. Some of these are dignitaries from distant worlds, while others would prefer to be left nameless. A meeting of the latter is taking place in a back alley bar in the floating city of Tolea Biqua even now . . .

Kletoo sat down quickly, his large lidless eyes scanning the room nervously. They were far enough back and out of the way that it was unlikely anything could be overheard, but gatherings like this always made him uncomfortable. "Why do we have to keep doing this? You know I like private rooms."

"Yes," replied the garishly dressed Human sitting at the back of the corner booth, "which is precisely why I meet you out here. People bug private rooms. Out here, there is too much noise to make out anything useful. Besides, I like making you . . . uncomfortable."

The Rodian glowered, an odd expression for one of his kind, but the message was clear enough. He disliked this venue, this meeting, and the man he was talking to intensely. If he weren't under orders, he'd like nothing better than to burn the Human down where he sat, outlandish outfit and all.

The Human must have read that intention in his body language, because he held up one hand in a peaceful gesture. "Clam yourself, Kletoo. I only meant that when people are uncomfortable, they pay attention better." He sipped at his Outer-Rim rum drop, smiling as the swirls of red disappeared past his lips. "I do like these things. Pity we don't own the manufacturer . . . yet."

Kletoo grumbled something about mammals and their odd tastes, but the Human let that go. The Rodian then said, "Okay, fine by me. I am uncomfortable, so I am paying attention. Give me a reason for both or I swear I will --"

The man shot Kletoo a meaningful look, one tinged with just enough malice to shut him up. "I would not finish that sentence if I were you. I know how

seriously your kind take their oaths. Let's keep this friendly. After all, we both stand to profit greatly from our mutual employer. Yes?"

The Rodian sighed and nodded. That much was true. "Can we get on with this, then?"

The last of the rum drop vanished with a long quaff. "I trust you have the documents I asked for?"

Kletoo slid a package with a pair of data chips and a coded reader across the table, leaving his hand on the parcel the whole time. "Yes, but you owe me double. I lost my partner getting this for you."

The Human stared at the Rodian levelly, smiling after a long, tense moment. "Your partner? That obnoxious little Duro with the blaster fixation?"

The Rodian's eyes swiveled forward, his species' equivalent of narrowing them at something he found offensive. "Yes."

Carefully, the man started to slip the package out from under the Rodian's insistent hand. "Well, you were going to split the fee, so, in a way, I would say you did get double. Wouldn't you?"

As he spoke, a pair of Trandoshans at the bar turned to face the back table. They nodded to the Human and let their coats fall open, revealing very large, very illegal guns.

The message was clear. Kletoo lifted his hand and let the Human have his parcel. "Fine. Is the money in my account?"

The man didn't answer until he verified the contents of the chips. His satisfied smile, illuminated in the glow of the reader screen, seemed almost a little too broad. "Oh, of course. My associates will show you out. Excellent work with these. Our employer will be quite happy to see them."

The two Trandoshans walked up to either side of Kletoo and "helped" him up.

The Human glanced up at him from the reader and sighed. "You can thank your partner for what's about to happen. I am afraid his little stunt with the grenades made rather more of a mess than we wanted. We needed you to get

on and off Nirama's ship without alerting him to your presence." The Human shook his head. "Our employer was rather specific."

Before Kletoo could say a word, one of the Trandoshans elbowed him hard in the chest. All the air rushed from his lungs, keeping him from shouting or making a scene as they carried him out the back doors.

The Human watched the two enforcers leave with a slight shake of his head. They would be quick, at least. After all, Kletoo had delivered the goods. The man felt that killing the Rodian was a waste, but his hands were tied. His employer had been quite specific about dealing with the agent, as he'd been about what to do once the files were recovered. The Human flipped open a small communicator and pressed a hidden button on its side.

"Yes, D here. Please inform Lord R that his package is in custody. The opportunity he has been looking for is in there. With his authorization, we can begin. N's hold on this system is as weak as it is going to get. We need to move now."

From outside came the high-pitched whine of a blaster.

The Human listened to the answer from his contact, nodded, and ended the call. Just then, the two Trandoshans came back in and headed to the bar for a drink.

The man smiled to himself as he ordered another rum drop. Kletoo was dead, but he would not be alone for long. This was about to get messy, even more so than his employer could imagine.

He pressed another button on his comlink. "Hello? Yes. Tell M that R is about to make his move. More when I get details. Goodbye."

Yes, life was about to get bloody, but that was just a fact of life when you worked for a Hutt. It was even more certain when you were betraying one . . .

Into the Woods

Ryk Osentay sits behind the newsdesk for Cularin Central Broadcasting. He looks different than he did the last time we saw him. His head, which once sported wavy golden hair, has been shaved to a light brown fuzz, and his eyes and cheeks have an angry post-surgery puffiness. If he's at all aware of the way

he looks, it doesn't show. He has the same half-awake smile he always has, and his eyes -- despite their puffiness -- shimmer with their typical lack of higher cognitive functioning.

Ryk: Hello, friends. This is Ryk Osentay, reporting for "Eye on Cularin." I'm happy to inform you that I'm recovering well from my recent bout with a nasty virus, and I'm going to be at full health again very soon.

Ryk continues speaking in voice-over as the scene shifts. His voice indicates that he is blissfully unaware that the camera isn't still on his damaged face.

The new scene shows Ryk on the streets of Tolea Biqua. He's waving his microphone in the face of a radiation-scarred Ugnaught, who seems to be growing increasingly annoyed. The Ugnaught tries to push past Ryk, and when Ryk blocks his way, the Ugnaught kicks him in the shin. When Ryk doubles over in pain, the Ugnaught clocks him in the face and drags him into a nearby alley, where he commences kicking and punching the unconscious Ryk. We see that the word "VYRUS" is stenciled on the back of the Ugnaught's jacket.

Ryk: In honor of my return, the management here at Cularin Central Broadcasting has decided to give me an assignment interviewing an individual after my own heart. Brin Hesk'I is a treasure hunter, a daring man who has explored everything from the sewers of Coruscant to abandoned Hutt strongholds to lost Sith temples.

The shot shifts back to Ryk, still seated behind the news desk. He most definitely doesn't know what the audience just saw.

Ryk: Now, Brin has come to Cularin, to search for -- well, I'm not exactly sure what it is he's come to search for. Goodness knows, there's enough in Cularin that we don't know about that he could be looking for almost anything! But I suppose that's why we paid him an exorbitant amount of credits to be here today. Friends, please welcome Brin Hesk'I.

A swarthy Human with short, straight black hair walks onto the set and takes a seat beside Ryk. He has eyes that look just a little too big, and a chin that looks a lot too big. His nose is crooked, most likely the product of a few too many cantina brawls, and when he smiles -- which he does almost immediately -- we see that every one of his teeth is a glaring, painful white.

Ryk: Hello, Brin. Welcome to Cularin.

Brin (still grinning): It's good to be here.

Ryk: From everything I've been told I've read about you, it seems as though you've led a fascinating life. How many planets would you say you've seen?

Brin: All of them!

Ryk: No. Really? You've seen every planet?

Brin (grinning more broadly; it's almost like watching a tall, dark Caarite): Not even remotely. But you asked how many planets I'd say I'd seen, not how many I've actually seen! And if someone asked me how many planets I'd seen, why, I'd say, "All of them!" Which I did. You see?

Ryk: Oh.

Brin: It's just a little lesson for all the kids out there who want to become famous treasure hunters like me. Just because you think you understand the question you're asking, that doesn't mean you'll truly comprehend the answer you're given. See what I'm saying?

Ryk: Um . . . yeah. So tell me, if you had to pick a planet out of all the ones you've been to as your favorite, which would it be and why?

Brin (grin turning thoughtful): Hmmm . . . well, the easy answer is Coruscant, since there's nothing you can't get there. But let's face it, Ryk -- Coruscant's been done to death. Everybody goes there! It's much more interesting to go to planets that nobody visits, little out-of-the-way holes that pretty much get ignored by the rest of the galaxy. That's where the real treasures are. In the places that nobody looks. Of course, there's something to be said for finding treasure in plain sight. Once, while on Coruscant, I was wandering through one of the museums -- they call it the "Children's Museum," and it chronicles the impact young people have had on our galaxy -- and I just happened to spot a crack in the floor that looked a little suspicious. Well, to make a long story short, this crack was not only hand-made, but it contained the trigger mechanism to open a secret room that had been designed by the original builders over two hundred years before, where some fairly important documents were stored. Right there in a museum, where nobody would have ever thought to look for them.

Ryk: Why have you come to Cularin, Brin?

Brin: Oh, a lot of reasons. First, I heard about what happened -- the whole disappear, reappear thing -- and I figured, "There's got to be something more to this place." I started doing some research, and you know, there's a lot of strangeness that goes on here.

Ryk (touching the puffiness around his right eye): That's the truth.

Brin: I did some poking around in a few restricted archives that I'm not supposed to have access to, but hey, who are we kidding, right? Security's only as good as the people who create it, and they're only as good as the slicers who don't try to get in. So I started reading up on this darkstaff thing. A real, live Sith artifact. It's been living here for how long? And I'll tell you something -- items that powerful, they don't get found just in ones.

Ryk: Excuse me? What do you mean?

Brin: Listen to the Jedi some time. They talk about balance in the Force. Well, when you start talking about things like that darkstaff, if it does what people say it does, there has to be something to balance it out. Some sort of powerful light-side artifact that just hasn't shown up yet. So I'm going to look for that.

Ryk: Where?

Brin waggles a finger at Ryk, his grin disappearing.

Brin: That's a trade secret. But I'll tell you where I want to start -- with the folks that seemed to have the most control over Cularin for a long time. So, my first stop will be out in Thaere.

Ryk: Um . . . you know that we're kind of at war with them, right?

Brin: I heard something about that. It's politics. I have ways to work around politics. You talk to the right people, make the right offers -- everything gets smooth.

Ryk: All right, then. I guess I should wish you luck.

Brin: Nah. Luck is for people who need it. The Force is my ally! But thanks, and let your producers know that they were more than generous.

Ryk: Friends -- Brin Hesk'!l. Thank you, Brin.

Two weeks later, Hesk'l's ship was found adrift in the comet cloud on the outskirts of Cularin. His whereabouts remain unknown.

Lockdown

Without shadow, one could not appreciate light, but without light, there could be no shadow. Indeed, shadow has covered Cularin these last few months, with the passing of heroes, the rumors of the war growing across the galaxy, and the unexplained exodus of Jedi from across the system back to their hallowed halls on Almas. The citizens of Cularin and its sister planets are rightfully concerned. What could be so terrible as to cause the mighty Jedi to seek shelter?

No answers are forthcoming, but the people of Cularin are not the kind to wait for tragedy. Many have taken to the stars in search of answers on their own. Others have joined the militia and pledged their lives to defend the system of their birth. Still others have their own way of dealing with the stress of the unknown. In a world of deepening shadows, people seek whatever light they can find . . .

"Dishen . . . dishen . . . dishenfranchized. Dat's whut dey calls us, righ'?"

Everyone else at the cantina had given Old Kuurt a great deal of room, but the wiry old Human hadn't let that slow him down. He was one of those people whose mouth started moving faster than his brain once he had some suds in him. At least this time, the wizened sot had a reason for his ramble.

They were all watching the Crosstown's holo-projector and the news program it displayed. Normally, such background noise would have been treated as just that, but this time the report had opened with images of a space battle. The sight of flaming debris burning its way through the atmosphere of a distant planet had caught the attention of the cantina's normally jaded clientele. The morbid news that some of the wreckage had rained down on a populous settlement and killed hundreds kept them watching.

Even Old Kuurt's bleary eyes were glued to the projector, but that didn't keep his voice from wandering over every topic imaginable. Most people at the

Crosstown were happy to let Old Kuurt talk as much as he liked. He was as much a fixture as the weapons bolted to the back wall of the cantina or the nearby remembrance plaque with a handful of names on it -- friends of the owners who had made the ultimate sacrifice.

At least this time, the old spacer's rant was about something comprehensible. The report had just finished mentioning that the majority of the ship debris had fallen into a section of the alien settlement reserved for its socially disenfranchised population. By this, of course, the attractive Twi'lek reporter had meant the city's poor, ill, and unemployed.

"Ya see. Dis ish whut I been sayin' all along. Them clonies go out and fight, but iss us whut gets the hammer dropped down. De Republic, it don' give a frell 'bout any of us. As long as we pays our taxies and behave like good lil' citizuns, we get ta have freighters dropped on us. Whutta deal!"

Despite themselves, the other people at the cantina chuckled. Even Geelo, the resident Rodian cynic, burred with mild amusement. Old Kuurt, deep into his sixth drink of the night, heard the echoing laughter and kept going, emboldened by the alcohol, the appreciation, or both.

"So I'm sayin'. We mus' be sum dum people to just sit back an' take thish from the Republic. I mean, if da Seppertists want ta go do their own thing, who're we ta stop 'em? Out on da Fringe, we didn' take nuffin from nobody and we didn' get offered nuffin needer. And dat was okay by us. Dat's where da real freedom is, lemme tell you. Out on da Fringe . . ."

Old Kuurt pushed his empty mug toward the bartender with a barely audible "fillerupp." The mug came back to him full, but this round was a synthetic ale with very little alcohol in it. The Crosstown and Old Kuurt had been playing this game for a while now. It was possible he even knew about the fake drinks, but if he did, he was either too drunk or too polite to complain. It wasn't like the cantina really charged him for any of it. Old Kuurt was a veteran of more wars than anyone on Cularin could count; whatever he ate and drank in these last few years of his life was on the house.

An hour later, Old Kuurt was in the middle of his longest rant yet about the government and how the entire Republic was designed to keep little planets small and propel the rich to even greater wealth. His audience was mostly ignoring him now; their attention was focused on the holo-vid and the latest

news out of Coruscant. These days, it seemed like a ship couldn't take off from the capital world of the Republic without another one blowing up somewhere.

That was exactly the topic of the current report from the Senate Port Complex #2, where the cruiser returning from Cularin had detonated a thousand meters over its landing platform. Details were still coming in, but it appeared Senator Wren was unharmed, having been pushed into a crash pod by one of her guards moments before the explosion. Recorded footage showed the fragments of the burning hulk hurtling down over the broad platform and into the darkness of the undercity below.

As the people in the Crosstown watched, dozens of small emergency vehicles began moving around the scene. They were clearing away debris, moving sections of melted hull, and searching for survivors. From the look of the ruined ship, that was unlikely at best. A few of the cantina patrons also noticed that while there was a lot of activity, especially around the crash pod near the edge of the platform, none of the emergency speeders were heading down below the port itself.

Old Kuurt watched the wreckage with vague disinterest. "Well, I wunner which 'dishenfranchized' that's gonna fall on."

This time, no one laughed.

Conversation in Shadow

Watchful eyes on Almas have witnessed many peculiar events in recent months: the departure of several Masters, the reassignment of Padawans to larger classes, and the arrival of a new instructor dressed in black. But even watchful eyes cannot remain open forever. Even those sent to spy on the affairs of the Jedi must sleep, and it is during this time, in the dark of night when all is still, that a shuttle comes from distant Coruscant bearing a most distinguished visitor . . .

The door to Lanius's personal meeting room slid open, and E1-6RA walked quietly into the room. Behind her, a man clad in the traditional robes of a Jedi Master strode confidently in perfect unison to her steps. The droid gestured to a seat opposite her Master and then bowed out of the room.

The two Jedi stared at each other for a time, each one hesitant to be the first to speak. Then the visitor finally broke the silence in the small stone chamber. "Why am I here, Master Qel-Bertuk?" His voice was weary but not truly rude. It did border on irritation, however, and for that, his dark face looked almost apologetic.

Lanius chuckled softly in response. "It is good to see you too, Master Windu."

The visiting Jedi sighed and nodded. "Forgive the tone, Lanius, but time is fleeting these days and I am expected to join my troops again soon."

Lanius smiled again. "Ah, yes, I understand that congratulations are in order, General Windu. You have been most successful to date with your facet of the war. Your work on Dantooine was exceptional, I hear."

The Jedi Master shrugged dismissively. "No need for accolades. I am doing what we must, and I take no pride in it. This war is consuming the galaxy and if we don't fight . . ."

Lanius nodded. "I have heard the speech, Mace. I did not agree with it then, and I don't agree with it now." He sighed deeply. "But it is good to see that you are safe. So tell me, how are we doing? The Republic, I mean."

Master Windu leaned forward studied Lanius's expression. "Honestly? I cannot tell. There was a moment, back on Geonosis, when I saw the entire swing of the war and how to end it. Now . . ." He stared down at his hands. "Now I do not know if it can be stopped at all. We have to, of course, but the path is clouded."

Lanius poured a drink of water and sent it down the table to Mace with a gentle wave of the Force. "What isn't these days?" It was meant to be a joke, but neither of their faces looked amused. Still, Mace took the water and tilted the glass to him.

"I'll drink to that." He did so, then set the cup down and asked again with a little more patience in his tone. "Why am I here, Lanius? You could have asked me about the war over Secure HoloNet."

It was Lanius's turn to sigh. "Yes. I need to talk with you about one of your former Padawans. Master Jeht."

Mace shook his head. "Darrus was never officially a Padawan of mine. You know that."

Lanius sighed again and poured a glass for himself. "Of course. But he did train with you for a time and his records show that you brought him into the order personally. That is true, is it not?"

"Yes. I found him as a very young child after . . . after an incident involving his parents. I brought him back to the Order and had him tested. After determining that he was gifted with the Force, I made sure he was placed with a training class." He looked pointedly at Master Qel-Bertuk. "Has there been a problem with Darrus? I was under the impression that you approved his transfer here."

Lanius laughed again. "Only if you count bruising my pride on a number of occasions a problem. I am delighted with our new Master; do not concern yourself with that. I just want to know why he is here. We already have a Master for lightsaber combat and several members of my staff are opposed to his faculty title of Master of Battle." With a sardonic mutter, he added, "Those of my staff that remain, that is."

Mace took another drink and looked at Lanius seriously. "This has not been easy on any of us. You are as aware as I am of this Academy's status with the Jedi Council. To be honest, you are fortunate to have any staff at all." His tone was not threatening or challenging; he was just stating a fact.

And Lanius knew it. "True. I am grateful the personnel changes did not take all of my instructors away." He tried not to let any bitterness into his voice, but Master Windu knew him far too well to be fooled.

"You inquired about Master Jeht. I will tell you what you want to know." Mace took a moment to sip at his water. "No. What you *need* to know. But I warn you; this may only leave you with more questions than you have now."

An hour later, they sat in the quiet shadows. This time, it was Lanius that spoke first. "I . . . see. Does he know any of this?"

Master Windu shook his head. "He knows what the Council decided he should know. He still believes what I told him. It is the truth, after all -- from a certain point of view."

Lanius shook his head slowly. "You know how I feel about 'subjective truth', Master Windu. This is certain to come out some day. You know that." He sighed deeply. "But you told me this in confidence. I will not betray that. I urge you to tell him everything before he learns it on his own." He gave Mace a concerned look. "If not for his sake, do it for ours. I would not like to think of what would happen if he takes the discovery . . . poorly. His heritage --"

"Is not an issue. We are at war. There is no time for this. Besides, he is a Jedi. We are above such things. We have to be." Master Windu stood up quietly. "If you will excuse me, I need to get back to my ship."

Lanius stood with him. "Of course. Take our thoughts and wishes with you. I do not agree with this war, but I support the Order always." He crossed the room and walked with Master Windu to the front steps of the building. In the distance, Mace's shuttle waited to pick him up. "May the Force be with you."

Mace nodded, obviously lost in thought. "And with you. Please keep an eye on him, will you?" It was the closest thing to a genuine emotion the Master had shown since he arrived. Jedi or not, he was obviously troubled by what he had told Lanius earlier.

"Of course, my friend. How could I not?"

Mace nodded a final time and strode away to rejoin his troops.

After he was gone, disappearing into the stars once more, Master Lanius stared into the reaches of space. This was all very troubling. Out there, terrible conflict was claiming the lives of billions. Back here, in the Cularin system, a different war was raging. If the two storm fronts should ever meet . . . He shuddered to think of the consequences.

He already knew his fate. He had accepted that years ago and knew that time was no longer on his side. Other destinies were not so clear to him. He had not expected to survive Kirlocca; that had been a terrible surprise. How many more would fall before his own death? How many could he save? When the Clone Wars ended, as he knew they must some day, would anything remain on his beloved Almas but shadows and unmarked graves?

Yes, he decided. If nothing else survived, the stones of Almas would always stand. In his last vision, the one of Cularin's distant future, these pillars still reached out to an empty sky. On these stones, he would leave a record for those who would come after. He might not be able to protect his children, but he could at least preserve their memory.

Kilassin For Hire

The more "advanced" species of the galaxy have a romantic notion that goes something like this: Many species are not as technologically sophisticated as we have the pleasure to be. These less sophisticated species -- we will think of them as "primitive," without meaning any disrespect and without considering that any might be taken -- have their own subtle forms of art. They are often adept at weaving, for instance. They make fine pottery. They understand the ancient art of carving wood by hand. And they are mighty hunters. For many such species, hunting is not only an art, but a religion.

This romantic notion has been applied by some, quite mistakenly, to the tarasin, Cularin's surviving indigenous intelligent species. It takes only a short search of the holonets to turn up academic papers relating the tarasin hunting practice to everything from fertility rites to Sith worship to a complicated form of dance.

None of these papers, unfortunately, seem to have been written by anyone who's ever been to Cularin for more than a month. While it is certainly the case that tarasin hunting parties are often so regimented as to seem ritualized, the simple truth is that without tight control over the process, the hunter will become the hunted. The kilassin, great reptiles that inhabit Cularin's jungles, are nothing to be trifled with. Without a precise plan of attack, tarasin who find themselves hunting a herd of kilassin almost invariably end up as a somewhat twitchy meal.

The hunt is much simpler than what self-important academics make it out to be. It isn't art, and it isn't worship. It's survival. And if there's one thing survivors understand, it's when something has gone wrong.

What follows is a journal recorded by a traveler in the jungles of Cularin. It is presented here to help others better understand the nature of the tarasin hunt,

and it chronicles a situation in which a hunt came to an unplanned conclusion. A translation from the Tarasinese will be displayed as the narration progresses.

There were at least eleven kilassin. That is what we decided, though their tracks ran back upon themselves and their spoor piled one creature's atop the next. If they were more intelligent, I might have thought them to be attempting to hide their numbers. But they are no more intelligent than a Caarite is tall, and no more subtle than -- well, than a Caarite. They tromped through the jungle with such force that I began to believe Cloud Mountain might awaken. I stayed far enough behind that they would not notice me, and I shifted my position as the wind shifted.

I was the advance scout [this is the closest translation available of the Tarasinese phrase *no'oma k'bri*, but it fails to capture the full flavor of the phrase; it also implies a certain level of honor at being the lead tracker, though contextual cues indicate that being the *no'oma k'bri* may sometimes (though not always) be a form of punishment]. I had seen this pack of kilassin before, I believed. There was one, a small one with the cruel claws, whose track was very distinct. One of his claws was missing, so that he left only a partial hindfoot print wherever he stepped, and he rolled that foot more than others of his kind, to keep his balance. So I had seen these tracks, with this pack, in the past. They had never moved like this before.

I knew from the tracks, from the moistness of the sap on the broken branches and from the fresh stench of their leavings, that they couldn't be more than an hour, maybe two, ahead of me. This is as close as most hunting parties come, until we push into the midst of the pack itself. Kilassin move slowly enough that if you allow yourself to become any closer than this before you are ready, you may find yourself walking into their midst after they stopped for a nap. A stream, or even a shady stand of trees, can stop a pack of kilassin suddenly, and lead the hunter who believes himself to have a good deal of space between himself and the great lizards into a costly error.

Had they been moving deeper into the jungle, I might have ignored them. They had two hours on me, and I had one hour on dusk, and if there is a time when I am less interested in actually finding a pack of kilassin, it is after nightfall. But they were moving toward one of the irstat, and I needed to stay with them, to push, since while most kilassin will not stray too close to an irstat, this herd was not behaving like most.

I called back to the others, signaling that we needed to hurry. They knew the route as well as I, and their response told me that they understood the danger. I began a half-jog, which is normally discouraged for an advance scout. If we get too far ahead, the remainder of the hunting party may not find us in time. But I believed myself to be far enough behind the kilassin that I could not possibly overtake them without having the rest of my party nearby.

The other difficulty in moving quickly while hunting is that one misses subtle signals. This is more true when the quarry is moving in an illogical or atypical manner. The challenge with these kilassin is that -- intentionally or not -- they *were* hiding their numbers. I followed the mish-mish of tracks, which remained a mish-mish as my eyes flashed across them. Carelessly.

Twenty minutes later, the first kilassin came at me from a stand of trees.

It was a small creature, but vicious. It had thick forelimbs and daggers for claws, and it reared up as it came at me, ready to cut me into small pieces.

The weakness of these kilassin, though, is their strength. They lack flexibility. They are fast and can maneuver quickly, but their limbs are thick and meaty. When one rears at you, the best thing to do is move inside the reach of its claws and hope that it doesn't think to fall atop you.

This is what I did. It ran at me, ready to rend flesh. I ran at it, trying to keep my flesh whole. I felt the air slice open as its claws passed my head -- one to either side of my well-retracted fan -- and then I was pressing my face against its smooth underbelly. It stank of vorgrhis leaves and sour water.

It roared its anger, and I shoved with my shoulders, knowing I must keep it off balance to the rear for a few seconds more. My hands found the vibroblades at my belt. I do not remember stabbing the creature. I do remember gouts of red staining my arms to the elbows and the rattling death-croak the thing belched at me before it lay still.

It was very difficult to get one of my vibroblades out of its belly. I almost left it. My fear was that the rest of the herd might be nearby, and that I would do better to have one weapon in my hand and one stuck in the creature's gut than to be attacked by another kilassin while trying to pry the blade loose. But it came free with my last yank, and I was glad. It is a good blade.

I straightened and spun, expecting more creatures to come from the treeline. They did not. I cleaned my blades and hurried on, knowing that the rest of the party would mark the body -- if they saw it as worth marking -- and follow soon. I could not hear them, but I knew they must be near. When you work as closely together as we do, you begin to sense things about one another. Had they been further behind, I might have slowed my pace. But they were there, a half-kilometer or so to my rear, and the pack of kilassin was ahead of me, still moving toward the irstat.

The best thing about following a herd of kilassin is that they are not subtle. Generally, you do not have to clear away branches or dodge around prickly underbrush. The kilassin have cleared a path for you. So I ran, not quite so quickly as before, and with a bit more caution. Being ambushed once as dusk was beginning to settle its gray mist beneath the spreading branches of the k'flua trees was enough for one evening.

Ahead of me, I knew there was a clearing, and from that clearing a path would lead the kilassin directly to the village. Signs said I was a half-hour behind them now, and that clearing would be a half-hour from the village, perhaps a little longer as day fell and night arose. For the sake of the irstat, I could not be cautious, so I signaled to my companions -- the whistle of the blue-beaked akcinor -- and I ran. I would catch the kilassin and turn them aside, or I would make my way to the irstat first and warn them, get them clear.

I came to the clearing and ran across to the path on the far side. Within seconds, I stopped. The path was thick with branches and vines, and the tall grasses to either side whispered and waved in the night's soft wind. The kilassin had not been through here.

Confused, I returned to the clearing and searched. The tracks led into the clearing, but they did not lead out. The kilassin had arrived at this place, had milled about -- it looked as though two of them had lain down -- and then they were gone.

I have hunted kilassin for years. I am very well acquainted with what they can and cannot do. These kilassin did not leave of their own accord. They were taken.

As to who would take kilassin, or why -- I wish that I knew.

Sacrifices

In the heart of the deep wood, the Tarasin practice their rituals of earth and sky. These are rites of an ancient age, as old as the race themselves and handed down for generations uncounted. The highest of these rituals, the vurgats, are performed in the most sacred of places on Cularin. These groves of power are surrounded by the eldest trees and ringed in standing stones charged with primal energies challenged by the first mystics of the world's native race.

The leaders of the Tarasin tribes sometimes meet in these sylvan sanctuaries for the vurgat, but only when their visionaries and Mothers see the ritual's importance as something beyond the norm. While the vurgat is always met with great reverence, they occasionally mark an even greater event -- something that changes the very future of the Tarasin race.

The vurgat held this very night is one such event . . .

She stood in the centre of the stone circle, her crests up and quivering. They were approaching from all around her, and the life of the jungle was coming with them. It had been many turnings of the seasons since so many of the elders were gathered here. Indeed, try as she might, Dariana could not remember a gathering this large in her lifetime. Perhaps in the time of her mother, or her mother before her, but not in recent memory had the heads of all the tribes gathered like this beneath the light of the stars.

She was mindful of the night revealed in her dreams, but she knew that night was still to come. Another *vurgat* would gather them all, even more than came now, but that was for the future. This night was not that night, but it was perhaps a whisper before the storm. Was this the thunder that somehow heralded the tempest she had seen?

They came now, the last of them. Mother Dariana was surrounded on all sides by the elders of a dozen tribes and their wise ones. The power of life itself was a ring of glory she could see -- could feel. The trees could sense it, too; as she watched, flowering fronds were opening as they would normally only do in the light of the sun. So much power was here, so much just in the presence of her race. It was a wonder to behold.

"Honored elders, I of the Hiironi greet you. You have come, unbidden by me but beckoned by the power that binds us all. I give thanks this night that so many have traveled so far. Let us raise our faces to the moons and give --"

"No!" came the wizened yet sharply clear voice of Kaylanna, irstat-kes of the Nirrani tribe. "I will not greet the moons or any other here until I know why we have come. We agreed to your terms a month ago and have been working as you asked, but it is not yet time for the *tarana-te'sath*. Why are we here?"

Dariana sighed, the expression sending a slow ripple of violet and blue through her scales. "Did I not say, sister, that you come unbidden? I did not send for you. It was not even my turn of the wheel to hold this *vurgat*, but I, too, came at the Calling of Life."

The speaker moved to the front of the circle of Tarasin. Kaylanna's face was heavy with age, but her crimson eyes were still very bright and aware. "Are you saying you *didn't* call us, Great Mother Dariana? That it was not your voice we all heard in our dreams? Not your Calling that brought us from our irstats and our people?"

"No," echoed a voice from the dark side of the jungle clearing. "It was mine."

The entire gathering of Tarasin froze for a moment; even Dariana stood stunned in the moonlight. Then a frenzy of activity broke out around the edges of the group as Tarasin warriors raised their weapons and elders called upon the powers of life to protect them from this unseen, yet strangely ominous newcomer.

The shadow was a tall one, cowed in darkness that belied even the black cloth of its sweeping robes. Dariana could sense something there, something not quite of the light . . . but neither was it dark. She did not feel any hostility, and from the looks of the others around her, they did not either. Still, the warriors advanced slowly toward the stranger, spears at the ready.

"I mean no harm, elders. I want only to speak with you." The newcomer's voice sounded Human and likely male, but his words were in fluent Tarasin. Dariana was old enough and wise enough to know how that was accomplished; she could feel the force of life emanating from the shadow and touching the minds of the warriors nearby. She still did not feel any danger from him, but that level of sublime power was enough to confirm that perhaps this stranger was the source of the call.

The other Tarasin looked now to her. She was standing in the place of the Voice, the stone upon which the priests of the Tarasin stood to address those engaged in the *vurgat*. If she did not relinquish her place, the newcomer would not have the right to speak with them, but to do so for a non-Tarasin . . . Had that ever been done?

It took a moment, but in the end, the aged Mother let her instincts decide. She nodded, her scales flushing with a bright green, and stepped aside off the stone of the Voice. "You must bring only your heart and mind. All weapons must remain outside this holy place." Her words were backed with the power of Life, but Dariana had the feeling that she would not need to enforce them.

She was correct. The black-robed Human walked slowly between the parting lines of warriors and elders, pausing only to hand a slender rod of onyx and silver to the highest among the assembled guardians. "A Jedi," Dariana observed quietly at the sight of the lightsaber. "This becomes more interesting by the moment."

The figure stepped onto the stone of the Voice. One gloved hand raised to his throat, undoing a silver clasp, and as he shrugged, his night-black cloak fell away. Beneath it, he was unclad from the waist up. His chest and back were covered in an intricate tattoo of Tarasin design -- a kir'ala tree with its long, weeping branches winding over his shoulders and arms. The work was elaborate, done in the special color-changing inks reserved for marks of true honor. At once, Dariana recognized the stranger, though only the tattoo revealed him. Everything else about him, even his eyes, had changed. Such sorrow.

"Gathered wise ones, forgive me for calling you here, but little time remains. If you will hear me, I must ask a favor of you all. I know what is to come, as do you. For any of us to survive to see the *tarana-te'sath* and the years to follow, we must ensure that life remains on this world. If the storm to come is one of fire, there will be nothing left of Cularin but ashes. I have seen the trees in flames."

His words touched the assembled Tarasin. Even Mother Dariana felt the truth in what he said. She had seen the dream all the irstat-kes had shared; now, it seemed others not of Tarasin blood had witnessed the approaching darkness. She almost wept at the thought of what her dreams had foretold; the Jedi's

words and the power of life that flowed through them brought tears to her eyes now.

Mother Kaylanna asked the question most of them were thinking. "What do you want of us, stranger?"

The Jedi paused for a second, closing his eyes. "I know what has been happening to the young of this world, those with the gift of the Force."

His words sent another shockwave through the assembly. Dariana was not surprised to hear this, but it seemed like most of the others were. Their work had been done in great secrecy, knowing as they did that if their actions were discovered, all would be lost. That a Jedi had discovered them meant everything they had done was for nothing.

"And I want to help."

That *was* a surprise, even to Dariana. The others were stunned, but she simply reached out with her heart and dared to sense the truth behind his words. There was no deception, or, at least, none she could feel. But there was more. There was something he was not telling them.

"I can bring you others. Many more can be saved from the storm, if you will let me, and I will keep my Order from discovering your work. But . . ."

Here it comes, thought Dariana.

"My aid comes at a price. One I will have to pay as much as you will -- even more, perhaps. For the cubs to be spared, the parents may have to *hiilau*."

Dariana's eyes went wide at the use of the term, but then she nodded. That made a great deal of sense. The *hiilau* was an act of sacrifice. When predators proved too dangerous around certain packs of kilassin, several of the older animals would lure the hunters off, knowing that they would be killed as a result. The deaths would sometimes convince the predators that there was nothing left to hunt, and they would move on.

The speaker continued. "This world has many heroes, many that will stand against the coming storm. I ask only that you make it possible for those who believe as you do, in life, to feel what they have to fight for, what they might be called upon to die to protect. Will you invoke the *shorda'ki*?"

A smaller storm erupted from the gathering -- shock, at first, and then arguments as the elders recovered from the newcomer's audacity. The *shorda'ki* had not been called upon for generations, not since the last war among their kind had nearly wiped out the Tarasin entirely. Even if they could invoke it, and there was no guarantee that they could, it would leave the force of life on Tarasin greatly drained. Enough power might remain for the *tarana-te'sath* when its time came, but after that, Cularin would be almost dead in the eyes of life.

And at that, Dariana understood. She understood it all.

Above the raised voices of her people, she spoke. Her words touched her true power, and that force silenced everyone. "Yes. We will accept your bargain. We begin the *shorda'ki* now. Depart our circle, Human. What comes is for Tarasin alone."

The Jedi nodded, reclaimed his fallen garment, and took back his weapon as he returned to the shadows of the jungle. He did not remain to thank Dariana, nor was he thanked for his offer to help. They were both doing what had to be done, both acting as life would have them act. A moment's respect and a moment's pity were all that passed between them. No words were needed or given.

The Jedi paused at the edge of the clearing. The Tarasin were beginning a grand ritual now, the *shorda'ki*. His dark eyes followed Dariana for a few moments, watching as she led the rite with her typical aged grace and firm conviction. He wondered for a moment if she knew how much he admired her courage. Then he was gone, his silent silver speeder gleaming like a shard of moonlight between the blurring trees.

Cause of the Month

A Rodian painter once postulated that "everyone is famous for fifteen parsecs." When asked what that meant, given that the parsec is a unit of distance, the painter sniffed and turned his back on the questioner, stating that, "If you don't understand my art, it isn't my problem." The fact that some amount of fame can befall even the most unworthy, however, has not gone unnoticed in the galaxy.

Take the case of San Herrera and Nia Reston. These two young Humans have, over the past four years, managed to repeatedly find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time (in the **Living Force** adventures "The Resistance Within," "Something Uffel," "Tilnes Rising," and "Memories"), have published a reflective essay on the nature of death, were subsequently interviewed live on "Eye on Cularin" by Yara Grugara, and most recently published an essay calling for the immediate freeing of every droid in Cularin -- indeed, in the whole galaxy. Now they've been invited back for a second interview with Yara. In her new "serious" role, Yara again has some surprises for the young duo.

San and Nia don't look as young as they used to. They seem more tired than before, and both of them have dark circles beneath their eyes. Most noticeable, however, is the fact that they have begun to dress like adults. Rather than the vest-shirt-pants-boots attire they've always worn in the past, now both San and Nia are nicely dressed, in suits that look to have been custom tailored -- if not at one of the most expensive shops in the galaxy, then at least at a competently managed one. They sit, hands folded in their laps, in a tall-backed black sofa. Both of them assiduously avoid looking at the holorecorder.

Yara enters from the left of the screen, shakes their hands, and takes a seat in a chair opposite them. She speaks to the recorder first.

Yara: Welcome to a special edition of "Eye on Cularin." This isn't Yara's show any more, and she wasn't planning on coming back -- ever -- but I suppose Yara did agree to conduct this follow-up interview, and the network owns her contract. So, here we are.

Nia: Thank you for having us.

Yara nods.

San: You really were the inspiration for us being back here, you know?

Yara had been rather dour up to this point. Now she brightens, the grimly serious newscaster face replaced with a playful half-grin that seems much more at home on the "Eye on Cularin" set.

Yara: Yara? An inspiration? Surely you jest.

San: Not at all. It was something you said the last time we talked that got us thinking.

Yara (beaming): Well, being honest, Yara didn't actually have time to go back and review the entirety of our last interview. Some sort of little argument with the producers got in the way. Now, what was it that Yara said that was so brilliant?

Nia: I'm not sure "brilliant" is the word --

San: You asked us whether the Force was in droids.

Yara: Ah. Now it comes back to me. Well, I'm glad Yara could be of help to you. Goodness knows, Yara has helped a lot of people lately! So, what do you say we jump into the questions, shall we?

San: All right.

Nia looks slightly concerned. She noticed the abrupt shift in Yara's mood, and doesn't look as though she quite trusts where the interview is going to lead.

Yara: So, what are the two of you up to this time? Plotting to overthrow the government?

San (chuckling): No, Yara. Not at all.

Nia (serious): We want the droids to be freed.

Yara: And which droids would those be?

Nia: All of them.

Yara looks at Nia, then at San, then at someone out of viewing range of the recorder. She runs a long, red fingernail over a datapad set into the arm of her chair and nods to herself.

Yara: That's interesting. So tell us, San -- the last time you were here, the conversation involved the two of you and your relationship. There was a third party. I think her name was Philinda, is that right? The "hot one"? How are things going?

San: She's actually been out of the system for a while. She was on Coruscant visiting her family when things with Thaere started to get ugly, and she hasn't been able to make it back in. As for me and Nia, nothing's really changed there. I don't think.

Yara: So you two are an item, then?

San: No.

Nia: Yes.

They look at each other.

San: Yes.

Nia: No.

Yara: This all feels very familiar.

Nia: Can we talk about the droids? It's what we came back here to talk about. I mean, you said that you'd interview us when we did our paper on droids and the Force, and we did. Kind of.

Yara: Wait. You were serious?

Nia: Completely. Free the synthetic people!

Yara: The what?

Nia: The synthetic people. It's what we call droids in our paper. And they should be freed!

Yara: If that's what you came on here for, why is San sitting over here talking about a certain lady friend who, if Yara remembers, you weren't too wild about him spending so much time with before? Why are the two of you discussing your poignant, on-again, off-again love life in such a public forum?

Nia: Because you asked!

Yara: Oh. I suppose I did. Well, I suppose it is what we're here for. Now, let me see if Yara has the context right on this. What we know about you two that's part of the public record is that you've attempted to bring "aid" to the Tarasin

when they weren't actually in need of aid, you got trapped in a bar on Tilnes when the mines partially collapsed -- are you even old enough to be in a bar on Tilnes? -- and while you were visiting Uffel, you managed to let an insane droid convince you to attack a group of innocent civilians who were hunting said insane droid down. Does that cover things?

San: You left out the part where we got kidnapped by the Thaereians.

Yara: Oops. Yara's mistake. So, having done all those things, having shown somewhat questionable judgment in attempting to help those who either didn't need or didn't want help, what in the world is possessing you to try to free the droids?

Nia: "Synthetic people." Calling them "droids" is demeaning. It's forcing them to be things, rather than recognizing the fact that they're just people who happen to have metal bodies and no internal organs.

Yara: Doesn't that make them machines?

Nia: But they can think! They can feel.

Yara: I can program my toaster so that it works exactly the way I want it to, and if it starts to over-cook my toast, it can tell and it shuts down. Do I need to free my toaster?

Nia: That's silly. There's a difference between a kitchen appliance and a synthetic person. A synthetic person is an individual who ought to have the same rights all the rest of us do. Yara, think about it -- synthetic people are nothing but slaves!

San: She's got a point. We argued a lot about this after we were on your show the last time. Yes they're alive, no they aren't alive, yes the Force is in them, no it isn't, back and forth. But what it comes down to is this: do synthetic people feel? Do they have aspirations of their own, besides "I must please my master?" If so, we can't justify keeping them in servitude to us. We have to set them free.

Yara: Once, my producers sent Daveed out with a new camera to follow Yara on assignment. The camera simply could not capture Yara's natural skin tone. It always made Yara look kind of orange. At first, we thought it was something atmospheric, but then, after a while, someone pulled out the backup camera.

And do you know what? It captured the true essence of Yara. But the first camera just refused.

San: I think you lost me.

Nia: Not me. You're lumping all machines together again. Synthetic people aren't toasters, and they aren't cameras. They're sentient beings who deserve our respect. The camera that made you look orange wasn't sentient. It wasn't refusing to do anything. It was just malfunctioning.

Yara: Some might suggest that a droid who thinks it has aspirations beyond "I must please my master" is also malfunctioning.

Nia: Hmff. I'd expected better of "Eye on Cularin" than that kind of species-ist remark. You know, that's just the way Hutts talk about their slaves.

Yara: That they're malfunctioning?

Nia: No. Like they're things, instead of people. We have to break that cycle, Yara. We have to help others see that synthetic people aren't just things. They're individuals. They deserve to be protected just like the rest of us.

Yara smiles. She rolls her fingers on the arm of her chair and nods to someone we can't see.

Yara: Well, kids, it's been a pleasure. Yara always finds it refreshing to see what the youth of Cularin is about, what the cause of the month is. Droid rights. Fascinating. Nia -- any final words?

Nia: Yes. Free the synthetic people! Give them Uffel! Outlaw memory wipes!

Yara: Ah, good. Now we're ceding territory to them. San -- final thoughts?

San: Nia's right. We need to take a long, hard look at how we treat droids --

Nia elbows him. He winces.

San: Synthetic people, I mean. They work hard for us, and they deserve respect and the opportunity to work hard for themselves.

Yara: Well said. Anything else?

San (blushing): If she's watching – hi, Philinda!

Nia smacks the back of his head. Fade out.

Making of a Witch

A reformed member of the Wyrđ speaks about the process of becoming a member of the group. She only knows about one isolated band, deep in the jungle, but she believes her story is not atypical.

It was the summer of my twelfth year when the dark side began to tug at my heart. I remember the day with a clarity one usually experiences upon holding one's child for the first time, or watching as a loved one passes out of this life. Those moments -- instants of birth, and of death -- burn themselves into our memories. This day was both of those to me. It was birth and death, and it was pain that I only began to feel years later.

The rains were not long stopped. Leaves hung heavy with water, shuddering and dripping onto rich, leaf-shrouded firmament. Trees in this part of the jungle only rose to heights of twenty or thirty meters, but their branches were thick, their leaves large, and the light made its way to the path I walked. The scaly trunks smelled of mist and forgetfulness. Where rocks poked their heads through the leaves, between the blades of grass, patches of brilliant green moss had taken hold. The moss shimmered; it was wet and dense. It wanted to grow. I felt it so strongly that more than once I knelt beside the path and cleared some of the dirt from around the base of a rock. I scraped at the dirt with my fingers, digging in, feeling for the edges of the rock, following its gentle angle into the ground. I might clear a few centimeters, and it might be filled in by a passing kilassin before the day was out, but I found myself thinking that this was the way things needed to be. For growth, there had to be potential. I would provide the potential. I would kneel in the gray and scrape the tips of my fingers along a mossy stone. I would give it a chance. More rock, more moss. More moss, more luminous, moist green.

It is the last time I remember thinking about anything beautiful for many, many years.

The wonder of the jungles of Cularin is that no matter how far you walk, no matter how many times you might take the same path, there are always things

that may surprise you. The jungle shifts. A tree falls, and we see the smaller tree that once hid behind it, wrapped in vines dotted with orange and purple flowers that can be mixed one way to make medicine, or another to make poison. A bush burns, and we see that it shrouded the entrance to a deep cave, filled with uncounted mysteries and beckoning the curious, the foolish, and the young.

On this day, I smelled the new before I saw it. The air carried on it a sharp staleness, the smell of old wood that has burned for a time, then been snuffed by the rain. The rains of that afternoon had been heavy, and not without lightning, but I remembered no strike nearby. Still, it would be something new. It would give me something to do, to avoid finishing my walk home, to avoid the washing that awaited me on my return. So I veered off the path, following the burnt smell deeper into the jungle.

Less than forty meters from the path, I saw the Tree. I have thought of it ever since as a proper noun -- it wasn't just a tree like so many others in the jungle. It was the Tree, and it had stood in the jungle for centuries before sending out its signal and drawing me in. The signal, which I first took for a simple odor, turned out to be much more.

The Tree stood no taller than any of the trees around it, but it must have been at least three meters in diameter. Its bark was a patchwork of browns and grays, splotched with dead moss and splattered with bird droppings. The ground around the Tree was slick with those droppings and littered with the bodies of birds. There must have been fifty scattered about, their feathers smoking, perpendicular to their carcasses. Some of them had no feathers at all, just oozing wounds covering their frail bodies. Some of them still twitched.

The bodies would begin to rot, soon. For now, their burnt odor remained masked by the smell of the wood, the smell of the Tree. Tendrils of smoke crawled out a half-dozen knotholes on the face nearest me. I followed their path skyward and saw a larger column of smoke spewing from the Tree's topmost levels. It had been struck by lightning and might have burned from the inside out if not for the rains. Or did it yet burn?

Every day, trees are struck by lightning. I've seen fires before, felt their heat, smelled their smoke. Even then, with so few years behind me, I could identify the type of tree that had been struck by the smell of its smoke from a hundred meters. Which, I soon realized, was one of the reasons I had come to the Tree.

While I knew there had been a fire, I did not recognize the smell. It was both too sharp (saying that it burned my nostrils would be stating things too subtly; it stabbed them until they ached) and too sweet. It made me, in a strange way, hungry. It called to me.

The first bird that I stepped on almost brought me back to myself. I remember the feeling of the body crunching beneath my foot, and looking down in dismay. Not because the bird had died (that was something over which I had no control, as it was cooked long before I stepped on it), but because I had just fouled my foot on the creature. I kicked it, and it skittered wetly across the sheen of leaves and white droppings and small rocks that surrounded the Tree.

I would not know for years how lost I became as I walked those few meters to stand in front of the Tree. It is sometimes impossible to recognize oneself as lost until someone manages to find you, after all.

Three of the smoke-oozing knotholes were before me, then -- one at eye level, one a dozen centimeters higher, and one four or five centimeters lower and to the right. I moved my hand past one of the holes; the smoke was warm. The air inside the Tree was warm. There might still be fire, might there not?

It should have occurred to me (and I think that it might have on some distant, indistinct level) that if the tree were to burn from the inside out, I should be as far away from it as possible. Where I stood could be a dangerous place. More than one tree has burned from the inside out, sap boiling until the tree explodes in a burst of wood chips and flame and scalding liquid. Tarasin have died standing much farther from such trees than I now stood.

I say that I *think* I might have thought of this at the time not because I remember thinking it, but because I remember being afraid. I knew the Tree was something to fear. That, I think, is why I continued standing there. It was a tree, like so many others, but bigger. Stranger. Darker. I dug a finger into one of the knotholes, the smoke pouring over my knuckles. I felt flames lick up my claw and singe my flesh. I couldn't pull away. I twisted my finger and my claw caught something -- a switch -- causing a one-meter section of the Tree to slide back and in. Smoke billowed out, thick and black, and flames licked at the Tree's bark, and I brought my hands up to shield my face.

The Mother of our irstat -- I will not name her, since it was not her fault that I ended up as I did, and she provided me with the best guidance she could -- had worked with me, encouraged me to learn to harness the Force. I was

undisciplined. That's not the word she used, of course. She called me "strong-willed," which I now recognize as a back-handed compliment at best. She meant that I didn't listen to her. She meant that I didn't practice as she told me to practice. I always had to do things my own way, on my own time and my own terms. It was only because she sensed a gift for the Force in me that she worked with me at all, I think, in the hopes that I might be able to harness my own ability before it destroyed me. Even under her tutelage, I had begun to walk down a dark path. If she noticed then, she gave no sign.

Five years ago, she died, and if she thought of me at all, she thought of me as one of her failures. I did not learn to harness myself. I chose instead to work to harness the world around me.

There was something about the Tree that had drawn me here, and now there was a door in the Tree, and I very much wanted to go through that door. But through fire? No. At the time, I could no more walk through fire than could anyone else. This was a skill that came much later. What I knew then was how to bring the rains back, to bring the winds, and to put out this fire. It needed to be extinguished. I needed to do it.

I raised my arms and felt the Force, the great web of life in the jungle. I felt the tension in the air that had been lightning, and was now memory. The heavy mist around me, and the puddles around my feet, shivered as I reached out and slid myself inside them. I became the tension. I became the water. I wrapped myself in the memory of the storm and brought it back, all roaring winds and whipping raindrops the size of my scorched claw.

The rain blasted sideways, swirling its way around me and into the doorway in the Tree. I tugged at the wind, twisting it, bending it through the doorway and up, deep inside, carrying the water with it. I closed my eyes and moved with the wind and rain up into the Tree, up stairs carved into wood so ancient that it had forgotten it ever lived, through rooms where Tarasin lay on the floor, all the way to the top of the Tree where the black hole that had spewed smoke now spewed rain -- *my* rain -- straight up.

I felt, but did not see, the fire die. Lowering my arms, I let the storm go, let the winds settle and the rain fall back to the ground, and all of the tension again settled to memory.

When I opened my eyes, she stood in the doorway before me. One burned hand gripped the frame of the door, poised to slide a finger into the knothole

I'd used to open it. She stared at me through soot-blackened eyes, and I have never in my life been more certain that another living creature wanted to kill me. Tarasin or no, there was an anger in those eyes that went beyond anything I had imagined. Strength, too. I still have not met her equal.

Her voice, a hiss like a recently doused cookfire, made me shiver. "Why are you here?" She flexed the fingers of her right hand, the one that did not hold fast to the doorway, and continued to glare at me.

There was no answer I could give, I thought, that would satisfy her. She would kill me without regard to what I said. I thus determined that, if I were to die, at least I would tell the truth.

I looked up the Tree, with its patchwork bark and its hidden secrets. I felt life, stirring inside it -- the other Tarasin I had seen, waking in the aftermath of the blaze. And I knew, for the first time, the darkness that lay at its heart. It was a place of power. I had to come here, no matter what the price.

"It called me," I said. Then I met her eyes once more and waited for the end.

Instead, she stepped aside. "We will see if it called you. Come inside."

So I entered the Tree, and the door closed behind me. When I emerged two days later, I was of the Wyrđ.

Further Conversations with Lanius

Master Lanius, the head of the Jedi academy on Almas, discusses recent events in an interview made somewhat bizarre by Yara Grugara. He sidesteps the issue of recent criticism of the academy, but he explains his philosophy of Jedi training -- and even makes a few jokes

In the past, Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk of the Almas Jedi Academy has been gracious enough to grant interviews with the Cularin media to discuss the "Jedi perspective" on events around the system. While he makes a point to note that he doesn't speak for the Jedi as a whole, his is the voice most of Cularin associates with the Jedi, and his is the face the average "person on the street" associates with the Jedi Order. It has been some time since his last such interview, and a great deal has changed around the system. The Jedi are fewer than they were, the galaxy is at war, and Cularin herself has come under

attack. Add to this an increased level of criticism of how the academy is operating, and Master Lanius has much on his mind.

Yara Grugara recently sat down with the Master to discuss these, and other, issues. Because of Lanius's busy schedule, the meeting took place in his office, overlooking the fields of kaluthin that stretch toward the distant southern horizon of Almas.

Yara: Master Lanius, thank you for agreeing to meet with me.

Lanius nods and smiles. He has aged markedly since his last interview with Yara, but he seems alert. He sits with his hands folded on his desk. Yara sits across the desk from him. She's dressed in a conservative gray outfit, a far cry from what she's worn for previous interviews.

Lanius: I'm glad to do it. You're looking well.

Yara (stifling a blush): Thank you. Look, before we start -- my producers, being somewhat cruel, had me review the recordings of our last interview. If I offended you in any way --

She stops as Lanius holds up his hand and shakes his head.

Lanius: We are who we are. You have nothing to apologize for.

Yara: Well, Yara was wearing purple Jedi robes.

Lanius: Violet, if I recall. And the cut wasn't quite right to be Jedi robes. I don't see what the problem would have been, regardless. Jedi don't hold a monopoly on bad fashion.

Yara (blinking): That sounded like a joke.

Lanius: Only in the sense that it was meant to be funny, I suppose. Jedi are allowed senses of humor, after all.

It seems to take a moment for Yara to process this information. We see the question play across her face... Are Jedi supposed to be funny?

Yara: Right. So the robes weren't a problem. There was also the issue of Yara calling you "Lan."

Lanius: What you call me doesn't change who I am, underneath. Had it really bothered me to be called "Lan," I would have stopped you. It's not as though you were calling me "Darth Lan," after all.

Yara: Well, and then there was the . . . well . . .

Lanius leans back, half-smiling. He seems to know what's coming.

Yara: Yara kind of asked you out. On a date.

Lanius (chuckling): You asked me, if I recall correctly, if I am allowed to date. The answer to which is no, as we established after the interview ended. I was flattered, of course. You're a remarkable woman, who's shown a great deal of personal and professional growth over the past year, and I certainly care deeply for you.

Yara gasps. Lanius belatedly realizes what he's said.

Yara: You do?

Lanius: In the sense that I care deeply for all living creatures. Not that you aren't special and unique -- we all are. Every creature is a critical part of the living Force, you no less than any other. I'm proud of who you have become, in the same way that I'm proud when I see one of our Padawans pass the trials and become a Jedi Knight. I've seen your broadcasts. Yara has graduated to a higher level of empathy and communication.

Yara: So, does that mean you accept Yara's apology?

Lanius: As I said, she has nothing to apologize for. But if it will make her feel better, and she will stop referring to herself in the third person, I will happily accept whatever apology she feels the need to offer.

Yara: Thanks. So, lots to talk about. Shall we start with the big questions, or the small ones?

Lanius: Start wherever you like. If you've got a question you're worried I won't want to answer, it's probably better to get it out of the way now.

Taking a deep breath, Yara checks the datapad she's holding in her lap. She forces a smile and reads the question she finds on the datapad without looking up.

Yara: Master Lanius, there are reports that your pedagogical methods have again been called into question. That the decisions being made in managing the training of young Jedi on Almas may not be reflective of the philosophy of the Jedi Order as a whole, and that there have been a number of complaints filed with the Jedi Temple on Coruscant by Padawans who were either asked to leave the academy, or who chose to do so because being a Jedi was not what they imagined it would be. What response do you have to these statements?

Lanius leans back in his chair, locking his fingers beneath his chin and staring for a few seconds at the ceiling. Then he glances out the window that makes up the southern wall of his office.

Lanius: I've had this conversation so many times . . .

Yara: If you'd rather not answer, I'll take a "No comment."

Lanius (shaking his head): No. "No comment" isn't what the people of Cularin are going to want to hear. If this question is coming to me through you, then that means other people want answers as well. But the issue is complicated -- on a number of levels.

He stands and walks to the window, then shrugs his shoulders and crosses to lean against his desk, a meter away from where Yara sits.

Lanius: I suppose that my first answer is, there is no "right" way to be a Jedi, so the idea that there might be a right way to teach someone how to be a Jedi is, in itself, strange. Being a Jedi is about learning and following the Jedi code. It's about understanding the role we have in the galaxy -- not just Jedi, but all of us -- and doing what we can to protect life. But the Jedi code is at the center of who we are, and it is at the center of all the teachings here at the academy.

He steps away from the desk and begins to walk back and forth, gesturing, clearly moving into "lecture" mode.

Lanius: The question we have to ask ourselves is whether a single model can possibly fit the diversity of species represented just by the students here on Almas, or even if such a model should be forced to fit, should it exist. Do we want to create Jedi who are all alike? Do we want to train our new generation of Jedi in such a way that their actions are predictable? And no, I'm not saying that Jedi are predictable, or that the training I myself -- and others -- received on Coruscant makes us so. Far from it. But if we were to adopt a single model

and use that model to train all Jedi, would it not be easy for us to be targeted for extermination? Even here, there's not a single model. There are the courses, but each student's emphasis will be different, and how that emphasis manifests depends on which Knights a given Padawan studies under, or goes on assignment with.

Yara: What about the complaints? Or the idea that someone might come to Almas to evaluate the academy?

Lanius: If I may address those one at a time? On the issue of complaints, there will always be such. The path of the Jedi is not for everyone. Some who begin training find that they are not well suited to the Order, and pursue other directions in life. Some, we determine to lack the discipline or character required to be a Jedi Knight, and they are encouraged to explore other options.

Yara: Kicked out, in other words.

Lanius sinks back into the plush chair behind his desk, his hands once more clasped beneath his chin.

Lanius: Some of them feel as though they've been kicked out. Others feel as though they've been given the chance to do something different. The life of a Jedi is very restrictive. Not everyone is happy doing what we do. Not everyone can be. And yes, some of those who are encouraged to leave the Order, to stop following the path of the Jedi, bear us -- often, me personally, since I am the one who makes the final decision and communicates it to such Padawans -- some amount of ill will. If they become angry enough to act against us, that does little but justify the decision we made. I have yet to read a complaint lodged against the academy by a disgruntled former student that did not make it obvious, through the content of the complaint, why the student did not succeed at becoming a Jedi Knight.

Yara: I'm sure you can see how some might find that attitude to be elitist or condescending.

Lanius: Perhaps. Asking a Padawan to leave the Order is not something I do lightly. I stand by every such decision I have been party to. If there is a way for an individual sensitive to the Force to be trained in the Jedi traditions, it is better that we do so. The way of the Jedi provides structure and discipline. It helps the individual who is in tune with the Force utilize that connection in a responsible manner. It would be foolish to routinely train Padawans to a given

level and then turn them out on the streets, with no further assistance from the Jedi. It would also be foolish to refuse to train Force-sensitive individuals who might be able to assist in our cause. Do you see the dilemma we face?

Yara: I think so. Could you clarify?

Lanius (leaning forward): It is my responsibility to help protect the galaxy. That is what I do, as a Jedi. The way I have chosen to do this is by training more protectors -- more Jedi. It's in our best interests to train everyone we can. This is a place where the Council and I disagree. They do not believe in taking Padawans past a certain age. I think it's more dangerous to leave individuals who are sensitive to the Force to find their own way. There are influences present in the galaxy that would take these individuals and use them, twist them, encourage them toward the dark side.

So, with the Council's permission, I determined that this academy would be more inclusive. While we do find wonderful individuals to train who might have been overlooked if the more rigorous training model were followed, we also find many who believed it would be exciting to be a Jedi, but for whom the lifestyle -- for whatever reason -- is simply not suitable. On the one hand, I think we should train everyone we can. This seems especially true given how many of my fellow Jedi have already perished in the Clone Wars. But on the other hand, there are more individuals, under this model, who leave the Jedi with their training partially completed. I believe that most of them do so of their own free will, however, and do not hold any anger in their hearts toward the Jedi.

Yara: What about the idea of a review board or something similar?

Lanius: I'd like to think that with the war going on, the Council would have better uses for its resources than sending anyone to Almas to review our operations. There are those, including myself, who make regular reports to the Council. If they find anything objectionable enough to send personnel here, given the grievous problems in other parts of the galaxy, I will be surprised.

Yara: That last answer sounded -- well, different. Colder? Is there something you know, Master Lanius?

Lanius: I know a lot of things. None that are particularly germane to the topic at hand, though.

With a nod, Yara continues. Her datapad flashes at her, and she puts a hand over its screen.

Yara: You've had some personnel changes here at the academy recently. How are things working out with Mistress Devan, and with the Duros craftsperson, Felanil Baaks?

A tight, ironic smile tugs at the corners of Lanius's mouth.

Lanius: First, if I may -- Devan is a Jedi *Master*. Giving the term a gender is something she finds objectionable, as do I. I'm not trying to control your language, mind you. I'm just telling you what she prefers to be called. That being said, Master Devan is one of the finest lightsaber combatants I've met, from a defensive perspective. If she wants to protect herself or someone else -- that individual will be protected. This allows her to better analyze the defense of her opponents as well, and spot potential weaknesses. She has quick reflexes and is as dexterous a Human as I've met. Beyond that, she's quite bright. She had to step into a difficult position, with Kirlocca's loss, and has done so with grace, dignity, and skill.

As for Baaks, he's one of the most engaging individuals I've ever spoken with, and he knows more about lightsaber construction, history, and theory than anyone in the galaxy, I'd say. We're happier to have him on Almas than I can possibly convey.

Yara: Any thoughts about the war?

Lanius: May it end quickly, and may peace find the galaxy once more.

Yara: Well said. And with that, I think I've just about exhausted my time with you. Thank you for being so kind as to speak with me. Any final words?

Lanius: Yes, in fact. Some for Cularin, and some for you.

Yara: Me?

Lanius (ignoring the question): Cularin, be strong. The future is clouded. I cannot tell what will come of the Clone Wars or the battles we face on our own doorsteps. But I believe that the Force will guide us, and that in the end, if the heroes of Cularin continue to step forward, Cularin will endure.

Yara: Me?

Lanius (with a gentle smile): Do what is important, but don't lose touch with who you are. Don't feel as though you have to fit the mold of the serious broadcaster so perfectly. Be a serious broadcaster, but don't stop being the Yara Grugara that the people of Cularin know and trust.

Yara: I'm not sure I understand.

Lanius: Smile, Yara. That's what I mean. Life is serious, and we need those who still remember how to take it lightly, at times. We need people who aren't afraid to say what needs to be said. We need people who can call a Jedi Master "Lan."

Fade out.

Academic Review

An anonymous source posts a report to Cularin's Holonet -- a report supposedly written by a review committee from Coruscant, which may (or may not) bode ill for the Jedi Academy on Almas. See what the slicers think in this supplement to the **Living Force** campaign, a tie-in to the latest scenario, "Decision: Almas."

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{{posttime 22:14:53}}  
{{postdate [yesterday]}}  
{{userid mstrslcr}}  
{{postloc Cularin holonet node qd3.199.x}}
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Hey. I held on to this for about two days, trying to figure out what to do with it. I was practicing decrypting and snagged this in transit from Almas to Coruscant. The encryption was good. Pretty snarled, in a standard kind of way. Not much of a thing to slice it.

Here's the visitation. I didn't know if I should post it because I don't even know if it's real. All I know, it's just another bunch of Force-hating crazies. But I also got no love for the Jedi. I figure, best thing to do is post it. People can figure out for themselves if it's legit.

[Begin decrypted message; origination node AJA2.273; destination node 000.JT3.000]

Esteemed colleagues:

The review is nearly complete. Interviews have been conducted with each of the principals and with a large number of subordinates. Analysis of the qualitative data will take time we may not have, given the state of things throughout the galaxy, and trends are present that suggest immediate action may be required. We group these trends into three recurring themes, which we have extracted from our data. These are as follow: lack of leadership presence; inconsistent visioning; and policy avoidance.

The issue of lack of leadership presence is one that most of our interviewees attempted to avoid. When they did speak of it, they spoke of the ongoing war effort, and the necessity to pull from local resources to meet needs in other areas of the galaxy, and avoided the question of the leadership that has handled operations in this system for better than a decade. The attempts to deflect attention from the shortcomings of the current leader to problems that originate in the situation is typical of locations where subordinates have ceased to critically evaluate their superiors. While we will stop short of referring to any brainwashing that has gone on here, it is clear to us that the subordinates are not clearly thinking for themselves. Many of them become agitated when asked direct questions about the shortcomings of the current leadership, denying that any problems exist. However, on further question, many do note that the leadership can seem "remote" at times, or "distracted." As one interviewee said, "He has a lot on his mind. Lots of things are happening, and we can't expect him to be paying attention to us all the time. The galaxy's bigger than just us, you know?" All the same, under appropriate questioning, this issue recurred sufficiently that we deem it a problem. To the extent that current leadership is distracted by events outside the primary job assignment, it may be that a change in leadership is necessary.

The issue of inconsistent visioning is again one that many subordinate-level interviewees deny being a problem. The core of this issue is that the approach taken to making decisions and otherwise leading our operations within Cularin has not always followed a linear path. When challenges present themselves, rather than utilizing existing means of problem resolution, it is more common for leadership to assign responsibility to less-qualified subordinates. Such assignments are generally described as "training," but they often involve very

real risks to the subordinates who are involving themselves in situations that are often well out of their capacity to influence, much less control. Whether current local leadership would be able to adequately address the problems without assigning them to subordinates is unclear, as this does not generally get attempted. However, the means by which assignments are made, as well as the strategic alliances that must be formed by the subordinates in order to accomplish their tasks, do not reflect a consistent approach to how to conduct our work. If the training of our subordinates does not adopt a standard model, how can we presume that the work we do will ultimately have meaning? The vision adopted in training and developing the next generation must be accomplished in as consistent a manner as possible, in order to ensure continuity of identity. Perhaps most troubling is the lack of appreciation from the subordinates that they are being short-changed. The "loose" nature of their developmental experiences seems to have empowered them, or at least provided them with the illusion of empowerment. In our judgment, this makes them dangerous, and potentially difficult to control.

The third issue is one of policy avoidance. Put bluntly, there are policies created by yourselves and your forerunners that were designed to minimize operational difficulties. To a large extent, our operation in Cularin ignores many of these policies, choosing to do things in its own way. It might appear that all blame should lie with the current leader. However, we have come to see that this is a more pervasive issue that permeates all levels of the local organization. It is something of a mass delusion, in which policies that have worked well for us over multiple generations are suddenly viewed as "optional." Subordinates should not be empowered, however. Nor should policies be treated as optional. Had you meant for them to be optional, it is the committee's opinion that you would not have made them policies. Perhaps they might have been suggestions, or "good ideas." But not policies. Policies are things we expect to have followed, and which, when they are not followed, produce aversive consequences. In our opinion, the local operation has been given too much autonomy and too few aversive consequences. The lack of oversight has allowed non-policy initiatives to spiral out of control, resulting in an operation that does not typify (or, one might argue, even remotely represent) our central focus. Again, we find reason to recommend that the operation within Cularin be subject to much deeper scrutiny.

It may be that you, our esteemed colleagues, find the timing of this report to be poor. There are many other issues that deserve our attention, and spending too much time on this might be foolish. It is our opinion, however, that the

problems we have observed regarding the leadership of our operation within Cularin, and its approach to both visioning and policy, are inconsistent with our overarching goals. To fix this problem would require significant time and resource expenditure, neither of which we have. As such, we recommend the closing of our facility in Cularin, and the immediate transfer of all personnel to the various temporary operation centers we have established.

[End decrypted message]

{{posttime 23:02:21}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid wampa1}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node a11.r9l1}}

So wait I don't understand, is this about jedi or what because what U said at first said something about jedi - this is a bunch of corpspeak and I didn't get it, but I bet those nodes are pretty easy to figure out - aja = almas jedi academy and jt = jedi temple, right?

UR friend, wampa1

p.s. is 'vision' a verb?

{{posttime 23:33:14}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid alyssaroxu}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node a889.m889}}

Whoa - the wampanator's back! It's been months since we heard a peep out of your sharp-as-a-puddle brain, wampa1! And again, you prove your inestimable worth to the online community by pointing out that which could only have eluded the synaptically-impaired. But slice this: Those "nodes" you decided to interpret for us? We've got no databit history to show that they're anything other than spacedust. Seriously. Anybody could have dropped those values into the posting before making it public.

That being said, I've got my doubts. I mean, there's nothing in here to say who's even being talked about. No names, no mention of Jedi - wampa1's got that right.

Gack. I can't believe I just said that. Even worse, I think his last question is right, too - is 'vision' a verb? I don't think it is.

Alyssa

Future Apprentice to Baylan

```
{{posttime 00:00:23}}
{{postdate [today]}}
{{userid tharestinx}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 0.0.0}}
```

I dunno what everyone's talking about. It's nothing but more Thaereian plots. See, I told you all along! I told you about them, but did people listen? No! And now look at where we are. This is just a way for Thaere to mess with everyone inside Cularin. Nobody remembers that whole destabilization doc that got posted a while back? Huh? Look how it's wrote. It's like, it could be anybody who does anything in Cularin. It's all part of the Thaereian plan, and you're all falling for it. Not me! Never me! Losers!

```
{{posttime 01:13:31}}
{{postdate [today]}}
{{userid wampa1}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92}}
```

See Alyssa at least U finally figured out how smart wampa1 is. 'Wampanator' is a kewl name. I think I will use it now, too. Everybody else needs to figure out that wampa1's smart. That rulz.

I think this is just a bogus thing that someone made up. Except if it's not, I think it is like the great Master Slicer said (you think he's like a Jedi slicer or something? HAHAHA!). The Jedi R in trouble.

UR friend, wampanator

```
{{posttime 01:35:31}}
{{postdate [today]}}
{{userid alyssaroxu}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92}}
```

Right . . . dirt magnet, let's get one thing real clear. You are not my friend. Are you stupid or something? (Should I write that in your language? Would that

help? Here: "R U stoopid or sumthing?") I just thought (hoped?) that you'd never show up around here again, after those pics of your mom showed up on that Yara program.

This isn't accomplishing anything. Anyone got a text analyzer we can run on this thing? I can whip one up, but it'll take a couple hours.

Alyssa
Future Apprentice to Baylan

```
{{posttime 01:51:15}}  
{{postdate [today]}}  
{{userid wampa1}}  
{{postloc Cularin holonet node c3.1s92}}
```

Alyssa U need to GET OFF MY NODE. I hate when U do that! R U dents? Look, I just wanted to put in my 2 creds, and I think if this is real then it's really bad for the Jedi. That's all.

```
{{posttime 02:03:22}}  
{{postdate [today]}}  
{{userid h8thegam}}  
{{postloc Cularin holonet node h8.1995}}
```

'R U dents'

Huh? I had to read that like 5 times to figure out he was asking if she was dense, and not practicing a pickup line to use on a droid.

Can someone please frag the node that little punk is posting off, so we can discuss this thing with quiet?

```
{{posttime 02:05:38}}  
{{postdate [today]}}  
{{userid daddy}}  
{{postloc Cularin holonet node c3.xxxx}}
```

Done.

```
{{posttime 03:33:33}}  
{{postdate [today]}}  
{{userid l337b0i }}  
{{postloc Cularin holonet node a.a.2.3}}
```

Ran a text analyzer on this. Nothing special. It's a bunch of corp doublespeak. It doesn't read like other Jedi documentation.

Not that this means much. If the Jedi wanted a review team, would they send folks who write like Jedi, or who write like they run businesses? But the language, the syntax, the flow - not typical Jedi writing.

I mean, not a single fragging reference to the force.

```
{{posttime 03:42:19}}  
{{postdate [today]}}  
{{userid puesday}}  
{{postloc Cularin holonet node s9.1a12}}
```

dropped it into a custom analyzer, with some samples from other corps
nothing matching on the jedi

50% syntax match with military writing, so maybe thaere or even the cularin militia, but the context is wrong

63% match with sorosuub

here's the kicker - 87% match with the written documents I could get my hands on from the cartel

seriously, can you imagine anybody but the cartel using 'vision' as a verb

?

```
{{posttime 03:49:39}}  
{{postdate [today]}}  
{{userid alyssaroxu}}  
{{postloc Cularin holonet node im.8thm}}
```

Nice. But isn't it the case that anybody can take a document and run it through a translator program to add in junk words? Maybe even make it match up with the style from another corp's documentation. I figured that out about an hour into writing my analyzer, then got hung up trying to figure out how to make the program pull from multiple databases and loop through both without starting to fuse chips. Starting to get tired, maybe I should just call it a night. I

don't know what to think about who this is talking about. We're putting way too much thought into it.

Alyssa

Exhausted Future Apprentice to Baylan

```
{{posttime 05:31:22}}
{{postdate [today]}}
{{userid weluvcularin}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node mc1.111}}
```

Hello Cularin. On behalf of the effulgent and most non-abrasive Thurm Loogg, the Cartel officially denies any knowledge of any reports being submitted which may serve to undermine confidence in the Jedi. We are certain that no one has any cause to be thinking the Jedi are anything but capable and competent, despite the numbers of them that have died in recent months. We are equally certain that just because Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk has structured the Almas Academy in ways that directly violate key precepts of the Jedi Order, he will not be subject to any disciplinary action.

With great love and affection for Cularin,

Thurm Loogg and the Metatheran Cartel
/ssd

```
{{posttime 06:00:00}}
{{postdate [today]}}
{{userid holosrv}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node central1.02.a19}}
```

At 22:14:53 yesterday, materials were posted to this forum which potentially violated security parameters. Cularin holonet services hereby suspends this forum until further notice. Any individuals contributing further to this discussion will be brought in for questioning.
Have a pleasant day.

```
{{posttime 06:44:53}}
{{postdate [today]}}
{{userid mstrslcr}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node qd3.199.x}}
```

Um . . . oops?

Professionals at Work

It may be a dark time for the people of Cularin, but even in the shadow of a galactic war, citizens have a need for relaxation. This need drives several thriving industries in the Cularin system: taverns, sports, and entertainment. Nowhere do these disparate businesses meet more readily than in the "Thriller's Row" cantinas and clubs of lower Hedrett. With more than twenty different drinking establishments, night clubs, and private arenas for all manner of games on a single narrow street, Thriller's Row has made a name for itself as a place where folks of any species or walk of life can come for a good time -- no matter how they might define the term . . .

"So as I was saying, we find this dead Rodian in the alley. Looks like a professional hit to me. I turn to my partner and say, 'Lookit that, Fealo, someone's thrown away a perfectly good greenskin!' Ain't that a riot, pal?"

The Human beside him had been talking in this manner for some time now, completely oblivious to his attempts to make the smelly man go away. Pretending to be deaf had not worked. Buying the unkempt Human a series of drinks in the hope he would pass out from inebriation had only served to keep him here. And while thoughts of punching him in the throat and watching him choke on his own shattered esophagus were amusing, it would probably have unfortunate legal consequences.

In the end, that left Sai-Ani Kannu sitting at the bar in a detestable dive known as Crater's. He certainly would not have gone there by choice, but the hovel was the selected meeting place for his contact, and he was oathbound to stay there until the meeting took place.

That meant sitting right there, in the chair he had been requested to occupy, for as long as it took for his contact to arrive. Apparently, that also meant enduring the seemingly endless stories of a disaffected OPS officer and his Human dramas. The tale from a few minutes back -- the one in which he called the Office of Peace and Security's forensics team the "Dead Jedi Clean-Up Squad" -- had been particularly appalling.

Sai looked down into his drink for the fortieth time. On the sole instance when he had been forced to slay a Jedi in the course of his work, the Cerean had not been proud of his action, nor did he wish to repeat the experience. The Jedi

had simply been doing his duty, and while the death had been regrettable, it had also been unavoidable. There was no reason to take joy in the victory, and Sai felt no reason to denigrate the fallen Knight or the Jedi Order. Besides, he still bore the jagged burn scar from his opponent's energy sword to show for his battle; once was quite enough.

Of course, like any skilled fighter, Sai was both intrigued and disturbed by the idea of any attack or attackers capable of defeating so many Jedi in so short a time. At last count, there were more than a dozen dead on Cularin; at least three had been fully trained Knights of the nearby Almas academy.

Sai was deep in thought when the comm unit on his wrist vibrated silently. One pulse. Then two. Then one again. That was the signal; the meeting was on. He followed protocol by finishing his drink, paying the barkeep a huge fee for his part in setting up and hosting the rendezvous, and headed behind a saffron-colored curtain in the corner of the establishment. The smelly Human watched him go, but unfortunately did not follow. Sai would have happily broken the piggish little man once they were out of direct sight. Ah, well . . . life could not always go his way.

The room beyond the curtain was small, but Sai had been here before, and that did not surprise him. What was new about the chamber was the thick blast plating on the walls and the hovering security droid near the octagonal table and several high-backed chairs. The droid was not subtle; it had a single targeting sensor and a huge barrel as part of its orb-shaped construction.

Sai had no doubt that the droid could use its weapon with a fair amount of skill, but the model was obviously designed to be threatening -- to seem so menacing that it never had to fire its blaster cannon. In a way, he could respect that concept. When he was working, that was exactly how he carried himself. "A gram of terror is worth a kilogram of skill," his mentor used to say.

The single occupant of the room -- a well-dressed Human male -- gestured for him to sit, which he did reluctantly. Sai was the kind of person who prefers to stand whenever possible. Sitting delayed reaction time and burned precious seconds in combat. He knew how to shoot while tumbling from a chair if he had to, but it was never his first choice.

"I know you are a busy man, Mister Kannu, so I'll be brief." The Human's poise and panache spoke of considerable money. But on a world like this, it took more than money to import Denebrillan star silks and rancor leather shoes; it

took connections as well. The latter kept Sai interested enough to overlook the man's social gaff in using his "last" name like a Human would.

"I appreciate that. What do you need of me?" He tried not to sound as annoyed as he truly was by having to attend a late-night meeting in such a rancid place.

The Human chuckled, almost as if he could read Sai's thoughts. He gestured around. "You'll have to forgive the surroundings. I call it urban camouflage. This world is in a state of lockdown these days, which means the authorities are busy watching Thaereian activities." The man sipped at a garishly colored cocktail with obvious relish. "Since the Thaereians would never do business in a place like this, establishments of this low caliber offer excellent concealment."

Sai considered that. He found that while he still disliked the cantina, he could not argue with the logic. He did not know the man's purpose here, but the work he wanted would certainly not be legal. Perhaps there was a good reason for being here, after all.

The Human spread a number of dossiers in front of him on the table. "Your skills as a bounty hunter are beyond reproach, but I am interested in your more . . . *direct* abilities. Your confrontational side, as it were. Shall we say --"

"Shall we say *assassin* and stop wasting my time?" asked Sai, flatly. "You need an assassin, correct?" He inwardly grimaced at the thought. After that business on Rodia, he was not fond of killing any more. It always got messy, and there was something he was beginning to find distasteful about it all. Maybe he was getting old.

The Human smiled broadly. "Just so. Please look at these. They're all open contracts on people in this system." He gestured to the folders and sat back.

It was all Sai could do not to wince as he leafed through the pages. Eleven lives were sitting in front of him, with images and descriptions, occasionally with names attached. These were lives that someone with a lot of money wanted to bring to an end, so much so that even the most extreme measures were being sanctioned. Reading about how the employer -- nameless as usual -- would accept collateral damage nearly turned his stomach. Sai was no pacifist, but the thought of killing a dozen innocents to take out a single target just seemed wasteful and barbaric.

"I take it you want to act as a middleman on these? Provide me with information on the marks -- for a cut, of course?"

The sharply dressed man grinned widely again and shook his head. "Not at all. I want these people kept safe. I don't want even one of them to expire."

Sai-Ani Kannu blinked. Of every scenario his brains had been generating, this was not among them. It was a full ten seconds before he could reply. When he did, his tone betrayed more surprise than he had intended. "You want what, sir?"

The Human calmly took the dossiers back and placed them in a small box beside his chair. "I want you to work against the assassins that will surely be coming for these contracts. I won't pretend it will be an easy assignment, and it certainly will not be without its risks, but the money is more than adequate." He took a datapad out of the same box and tossed it to Sai languidly. "You'll find the contract there, along with everything you just looked over."

Sai caught the datapad out of reflex, but his minds were still trying to catch up to the concept of what he was being asked to do. This was a first. Still, something about the assignment was very appealing. He nodded mutely, breaking the silence only to ask, "Why?"

The Human shrugged, sipping his drink again. "I'm paying you too much to ask that. I have my reasons. Let's just say a lot of things are coming to a head in this system, and my people want a certain balance of power for political reasons. That's all you need to know, and all that is safe for you to know." For the first time, the Human's gaze turned deadly serious. "Am I understood?"

Sai knew that look well. "Crystal clear, sir. I'll take the assignment." Inwardly, he was relieved. Sure, there would be danger, but he was a professional, and this work suited him right now. Perhaps it was an echo of guilt for the Jedi he had slain, but the idea of protecting people was appealing. It felt right.

"Mister Kannu," the Human said as he was leaving, "I am sure I don't need to tell you to be careful or discreet, but I must insist that none of the targets know of your presence. Just as my people don't want them slain, we also do not want them to know they have been targeted by assassins. We need them to go right on being heroes without looking over their shoulders for yet another threat."

Sai nodded. "Business as usual for them, then. That suit your purposes?"

The Human gave one last broad smile. "Perfectly."

View from the Roof

By Lora Nadad

Students from the Almas Academy talk about the roof of the academy as a place to meditate and to consider the state of the galaxy, their lessons, and whatever else happens to be going on.

It's funny. I never thought I'd be the kind of person who had a lot to say. I mean, I'm no one special. That's what I grew up thinking, at least. A person with problems, drifting way too fast toward the dark side. I wanted to be a Jedi, and then I thought I didn't. Now I am, and the irony is pretty extreme. I finally get to a place where I can start finding some peace in my life, some peace with myself, and the galaxy goes crazy.

The thing we've all been taught, though, is that when things around you get crazy, you have to keep what's in your head and what's in your heart calm. The Force is always around us. It's always at peace. The times we get really upset are when we aren't looking for the Force, or when we aren't looking in the right way. It's like Minos says -- being a Jedi is about keeping peace, but to keep peace outside your mind, you have to keep peace inside your mind first. It took me a long time to figure out what that meant, and even longer to figure out how to do it.

I guess I don't even know who I'm writing this for. There's a part of me that thinks the Jedi need to record everything we can, just in case. There are fewer of us in the galaxy than in generations. What if the worst happens? What if the Republic survives the war, but all the Jedi die in the process?

It's not something I'm afraid of. Dying, that is. My life isn't all that significant, since if I die, I'll just become part of the Force, and there's nothing to fear in that. But what makes me think we ought to record everything we can is that if the Jedi are gone, who's going to teach people about the Force? People like Mother Dariana are beautiful, but if you look at the Tarasin, or other Force-using cultures, they don't usually teach anyone who's not from their culture about the Force. Which is fine, but what about a little girl who's born in the Outer Rim who can feel the Force but doesn't know what to do with it? What

happens to her if there are no Jedi to help train her, to help teach her how to use the Force? I know what it's like to try to learn on your own. You get frustrated. You get angry. It's frightening to try to puzzle out this thing that makes you different from almost everyone around you. And all of those emotions are paths to the dark side.

The thing I really want to talk about is how to clear your mind -- how to let go of anger, fear, and frustration. And I've asked some of my friends here at the academy about it, too. There are lots of places in the academy where students go to clear their minds. Some of us like empty classrooms, or the area by the fountain in the main hall. Some of us like to meditate to the hissing of lightsabers in the practice hall, because if you can clear your mind with the grunting and slashing of combat all around you, you can clear your mind anywhere.

I like to go up on the roof of the academy, stare out over the kaluthin, and let everything go. What do I feel when I see the view from the roof? Here's the best I can explain it in words:

The first thing you notice up on the roof is that it's like leaving the academy behind. Everything inside is clean and shiny, all marble and polished steel. It smells like disinfectant and hard work, exactly the kind of environment you think about when you imagine a place where Jedi train Padawans.

The roof is just a roof. It's usually covered with a thin layer of sand that's been carried in on the wind, and there are vents and spinning bowls and it probably hasn't ever smelled like disinfectant. It smells like the world.

There's a low lip at the edge of the roof where the white walls rise up an extra twenty or so centimeters. so that people can't see that the roof of the Jedi Academy looks just like the roof of a bank, or the roof of a smuggler's den, or the roof of one of the Cartel's offices. Sometimes we sit on the lip, legs crossed (since it's bad form to dangle your legs down the walls of the academy), but usually we just sit beside it. Maybe we bring up a mat to sit on, but most of the time we just brush away a little sand and settle in.

What really starts to clear your mind is looking out over the lip and seeing the kaluthin. Whether or not there's any wind, the kaluthin move. They sway like they're dancing to music none of us can hear, all of them perfectly synchronized, all of them bending just so, then straightening, then bending another way. I don't think there could be a wind that moved them quite that

perfectly. Sometimes it's like looking out over a glowing sea, watching waves crash silently on an invisible shore.

If there's no wind, then there isn't much else to move the kaluthin. Whether we're right or not, we decided early on that the way the plants moved was the way the Force was moving, flowing through them, bending them this way and that. So I watch the kaluthin. I watch their movements. I let myself bend to the left as they bend to the left. I let myself bend to the right as they bend to the right. I open myself to the Force, feel it the way they feel it, and let everything else go.

You watch the kaluthin. You focus on one little patch, or maybe a single stalk, and everything around that patch or stalk starts to blur. The universe drifts away. All the sounds, all the smells, all the emotion falls into the blur. You're moving with the kaluthin, and you're moving with the Force.

Time doesn't have much meaning at that point. I've sat for hours, swaying, looking out over the kaluthin, feeling the nothing that surrounds the Force. I push against the nothing, and it moves away. When I stop pushing, it comes back, always stopping just before it gets to me. After a while, even the image of the kaluthin fades, and I see a gentle glow that bends one way, bends the other way, extends itself into the nothing, and then pulls in on itself. It's like a heartbeat, only it's the galaxy's heartbeat. While I'm sitting there, legs crossed, I can feel how much a part of it I am. I can feel how I am connected to everyone, to everything. Even to the nothing.

The hardest part is coming back. I guess that's like any trance. Sometimes I pull myself out. Sometimes I have to be shaken back, and it's like having a bucket of water slammed into my face. Not the water -- the bucket itself. The world comes into this impossibly sharp focus, and I can see every grain of sand on the roof, every crack in the lip atop the wall, every wispy cloud, and every distant arcing rooftop. I hear everything, from the whirring of the fans to the settling of the air to the distant grinding of sand over sand, and beneath it all, the hiss of the kaluthin as their stalks stretch out and touch one another.

It's a pretty amazing view. Everything up there is amazing. It's the best way I've found to leave the academy behind without leaving the academy. Not that I want to go anywhere, but sometimes you have to wonder -- am I becoming better at being a Jedi because of where I am, because of the environment I'm in? Can I still find my center when I don't have Master Lanius nearby?

There are other things we've tried. Arin likes to borrow the ch'hala cutting that Mother Dariana gave the academy for its greenhouse. She brings its pot up onto the roof with us, and we'll put it between us, or up on the lip. The cutting likes the air outside, even if it's not air that should really be able to sustain life, and if you watch, the cutting starts to sway with the kaluthin, changing colors in time to their movements.

I think that kind of sums up what it's like on the roof. And here's why it's important: Almas is not a planet that should have ever supported life. But it does. It's so far away from the suns that it shouldn't ever feel like "day" here. But it does. And the reason it works is that even though there wasn't much life here, there was the Force. What I've learned on the roof is that no matter where you go, the Force is always there. It's just a matter of learning to see it.

-- LN

Priorities

Jedi Master Darrus Jeht has plenty of ships, but lately he finds himself drawn more and more to the Legacy -- an antique vessel that was delivered to him in crates. He doesn't know who sent him the parts or why, but he's happier aboard the fast, mysterious ship than anywhere else.

She looked at the bay with a gleam in her eyes. "Okay, Darrus. It's official." With one hand on her hip, the Twi'lek grinned over at where he lay on a hover board under a heavy engine assembly up on hydrojacks. "You have too many ships."

Across the hangar, a second woman nodded. "Well, in all fairness, Aayla, this one here is mine." The ship the Human female gestured to as she spoke was a blood-red metallic Firespray. It was one of four starships in the bay; the other three belonged to the Jedi under the engine. The Twi'lek had mechanical grease on her blue hands and was looking over all the ships with considerable envy.

"Have you become a collector while I was away, Darrus?" Her tone was playful, but the message was clear. Jedi were not supposed to have significant personal holdings. Such things were not only considered a distraction but could cause a

conflict of interest. Master Darrus Jeht understood the rule and even agreed with it, but this inadvertent collection of ships wasn't intentional.

The Headhunter, his first vessel, was an assigned ship purchased through the auspice of the Almas Academy when he was an active student in need of transport. The *Night Gyre*, as she was called, was a point of personal pride, and though she had been through a number of scrapes, she always came out of them relatively intact. Of course, Tril called her neurotic, but that was because of an intermittent sensor ghost caused by an unfortunate asteroid incident before Darrus had taken possession of the ship. No matter how often the *Night Gyre's* systems were replaced, the "ghost" remained. In his eyes, that was part of her charm.

Then there was the ship the lady Twi'lek was sitting on, her sandaled feet dangling over the side. It was one of a kind -- a prototype Delta starfighter of the same production run now in service as the Jedi fighter of choice. Near the Twi'lek's left hand, one of the fighter's two slave astromechs swiveled and beeped softly. That was R4-D1; R4-D2 was on the other side of the fighter's daggerlike hull, echoing its sibling's system noises. The chatter made the blue-skinned Jedi giggle. "Your big black ship is talking to itself again, Darrus."

The Delta starfighter had been assigned to him by the Council on Coruscant, though its occasionally schizophrenic nature made him acutely aware at times of just why the production-line Delta 7s had only one astromech attached. The input from two droids was sometimes more than the flight computer could take and left the ship . . . unstable. The droids also had a habit of arguing with each other, not the kind of thing a pilot should have to cope with in the middle of a dogfight.

He chuckled quietly back to the Jedi, rolling his dark eyes at the fighter under her. "It does that." He took a spanner to the line of bolts over his head as the two women in the bay started talking about something he could not quite make out. They were good friends, those two, and for that Darrus was grateful. Things would be been a lot more complicated these days if they were not.

The ship he was working on now was a total mystery, much like his social life. It had started arriving in massive crates a few months ago from a departure point near the old Taris system. The shipments were always marked to him and always pre-paid, but there were never any indications where they had come

from. Even Tril's system Milliner had been unable to trace the cargo manifests, which meant they had been utterly concealed. But why? And by whom?

It wasn't like the vessel was an industrial secret or apparently stolen. No, it was actually some kind of antique, with structural parts dated more than two millennia old. It had obviously seen better days, and even once the cargo crates had all arrived, there had not been enough parts to complete a full vessel. He'd called in every favor he had plus a few he didn't just to get the parts needed to complete her. When he was done, the ship had been as much an enigma as it had when it was in pieces.

Her profile matched nothing in any of the galactic records. The original parts showed signs of being custom work, though some of her design elements were Corellian in nature. Several panels had evidence of combat wear, and her hyperdrive was of an antiquated but extremely efficient construction. She was *fast*, especially for a ship of her age. Not the fastest transport her size, but with the right parts, she could certainly hold her own.

The one thing Darrus had not been prepared for was how quickly he had become attached to the new ship. In the last six months, he had clocked fewer than ten flight hours in the *Night Gyre*, and his only pilot time with the Delta-6 was a combat mission in the Torrad system. Every other time he'd been in space, it was at the controls of the *Legacy*.

The name had been Tril's idea, but it fit well. The ship was obviously a gift from someone unknown, and while it was nothing he had ever seen before, it did *feel* like a part of him. He felt very comfortable walking along its curved corridors. It felt right to have his troopers in its bunk compartments and his speeders in its ready bay. When he fired up the *Legacy's* engines and screamed into the deep black, he felt contentment like nothing he'd ever experienced before. The *Legacy* was a part of him, one that had been missing long before that first mysterious crate arrived on Almas.

Even Shard, the leader of his troopers, had commented on how much more relaxed Darrus seemed to be when he was working on the *Legacy* or sitting behind her controls. It was true; he was happier aboard the *Legacy* than he was anywhere else in the galaxy. He did most of his training in her main bay now, and when he slept, it was generally in his shipboard cabin -- unless duty demanded otherwise.

Darrus tightened the last of the bolts and slid out from under the engine casing. A and Tril were over by the water dispenser, drinking and giggling manically. "All right, you two," he said as he wiped bearing fluid from his hands, "what is it?"

They looked at each other like conspirators caught in the act. When they stopped grinning long enough to speak, it was Trilinae that answered. "Oh, nothing really. We were just plotting to swipe your fighters. Aayla thinks it would take you a day to even notice, but I know you better. I said we could fly the Kessel Run, race to Rodia, and take the rest of the month vacationing in Cloud City before you missed us."

Darrus colored slightly, blushing at the jibe. He had been more than a little preoccupied lately, but with the Jedi Hunters prowling Hedrett and things heating up elsewhere, it was everything he could do not to dwell on death and loss all day. He desperately needed these distractions, but they should not come at the expense of others.

He shucked off his worksuit and changed quickly into light evening attire. It was the balmy season outside, and Cularin's humidity could be stifling for the over-dressed. He came over, put an arm around both their shoulders and smiled. "Okay, if you think me so inattentive, how do you explain these?"

He concentrated for a moment and a small metal clip hovered up out of his shirt pocket. Attached to the clip was a trio of thin steel sheets, each one embossed with red and black letters and a hologrammatic image of several figures moving on a circular stage. At the sight of the concert tickets, Trilinae's eyes grew wide, and the Twi'lek's smile went from amusement to delight.

"Sien'Soro!" they howled simultaneously. "Backstage!? How?"

Darrus nodded. He had been preoccupied lately, but not so inattentive as to miss the one concert appearance in this quadrant of the galaxy by the one band he knew both women adored. It had taken some considerable effort to score the tickets, but when one rescues a band's transport convoy from a Separatist blockade, such things become easier to arrange.

"I have my ways. Now, the concert's four parsecs away, but I can think of only one ship around here fast enough to get there in time. And since you two have been teasing me so much that I haven't been able to remount her hyperdrive, I guess we'll probably miss the --"

Both women were out from under his arms and across the bay to the *Legacy* before he could blink. Aayla started jacking up the motivator while Trilinae prepped the drive cradle. "What are you just standing there for, Darrus?" she said with an urgent look in her eyes. "We have work to do!"

He chuckled softly and headed back over to his worksuit. Somehow, he had a feeling they would not be teasing him about the *Legacy* any more. Now, if only he could figure out how to get the new fighter cradle assembly to work, life would be perfect -- if only for a little while.

But which fighter to stow on the *Legacy*? The *Night Gyre* or the Delta-6? Darrus looked between them even as Aayla and Tril started arguing about manifold couplings and what to wear to the concert. Decisions, decisions...

Zero Zero Zero

In a recent article appearing on Cularin's holonets, Senator Lavina Wren's performance during an impassioned speech to the Galactic Senate was likened to that of a female gundark protecting her young. "It was," the author said, "a display of barely contained rage. All teeth and muscle, Senator Wren pounded her podium hard enough that it spewed forth a shower of sparks that caught the hem of her robe on fire. If the Senator noticed the smoke and flames before her aides put it out, she gave no sign. She was too busy daring the Senate to ignore Cularin's plight, calling into question the loyalty of anyone who refused to assist her home, who ignored the fact that the single largest Jedi training facility outside of Coruscant might be in danger. Only a rebuke from the Supreme Chancellor himself quieted the furious Senator. She took a deep breath and asked permission to lodge a third formal request for military assistance. Her voice, calm and dangerous, offered none of the fear her aides -- their faces pale and drawn behind her -- clearly felt at the request. They knew, as she must, that a third denial of assistance would indicate that the Senate viewed the request as frivolous, and would consider no further requests for assistance for the duration of whatever current crisis the system faced . . ."

What follows is the Lady Senator's subsequent address to the people of Cularin, delivered after the Senate's decision.

Citizens of Cularin. It will come as no surprise to anyone that the war across the galaxy seems to be escalating. Many lives have been lost, many worlds ruined, by the forces of the Confederacy of Independent Systems and an

insidious enemy who seems, if reports are true, to have begun specifically targeting Jedi for extermination. When the war was just a war -- in the sense that any war is ever "just" anything -- I found myself able to understand the Senate's reluctance to provide assistance to our home. Understand, but not accept.

Toward the end of last year, I filed my first formal request for military assistance to the Senate. The request was denied after minimal discussion, and I did not fight it openly. There are times and places to fight, but the flight deck of a ship whose pilot is trying to navigate a drunken asteroid field is not one of them. When you find yourself in such a situation, the only responsible thing to do is step back and wait. Go aft, find a quiet place to sit and collect your thoughts. Save the fighting for a time when it won't get everyone on board killed, or for a time when *not* fighting will send your ship hurtling into the nearest sun.

The first petition is protocol. That's the way of things. I knew nothing would come of it, but as I told you when last I addressed Cularin, I had to ask, and I had to recognize that Cularin is uniquely capable of protecting herself. There's no need, I thought, to call in a Jedi-led clone army. We have our own Jedi army, and we have the people of Cularin herself. I cannot think of a stronger, more capable people than you. Perhaps they exist somewhere in the galaxy. If they do, the Confederacy armies should beware of them, just as they are clearly wary of Cularin.

It was protocol, but it was necessary protocol. To not file a petition under those circumstances would have taken away the possibility of requesting aid if the situation were to escalate. It would have set us adrift without a locator beacon. So I filed, I was denied, and the universe went on.

Three months ago, one of my senior aides informed me that another threat had arisen within Cularin. She assured me that while our citizens had risen to the challenge, this situation might be a sign of new dangers.

This forced me to make a difficult decision. As pilot of our shared vessel, whenever threats arise, I have three switches on my control panel that I can flip to attempt evasive maneuvers. The first of these, I flipped when I lodged my initial petition for military aid. This switch rarely does anything but prime the ship's engines, but sometimes, that's all it takes. It was not so in this case, so now I had only two switches left. Put differently, I could petition for

assistance twice more within the year. But no more than that. Each petition requires a separate vote, and if three votes are denied within the space of a year, the petitioning system is treated as making frivolous requests. Past Senators have abused the willingness of the Senate to hear requests for assistance, and Supreme Chancellor Palpatine wisely enacted a restriction on the number of such requests that may be heard from the representatives of any system.

The decision, then, was whether to flip the second switch -- whether to ask the Senate for aid and risk being refused. I spoke at length with Sa'arli, my aide, and decided to petition once more. The situation in Cularin seemed to have become direr, and in my judgment, the lack of progress and a rumored increase in the Thaereian Navy justified a second petition.

The fight this time was harder. I asked, I pleaded, I made the case that Cularin needed to be protected. We might not be at the center of the galaxy, but we are its very heart. We are the people who make the galaxy what it is. We are a microcosm of all the galaxy has to offer, with hundreds of species represented, with our growing Militia, with a Jedi Academy, and with our own invading army. Beyond all of that, Cularin has faced threats the rest of the galaxy can only imagine. I won't enumerate them now -- you live with them every day. But I stood before the Senate and listed the threats faced by the heroes of Cularin over the past decade. Point by point, I went through what you have been forced to endure. I provided them with a list of the names of the brave individuals of many species who have given their lives in defense of our home.

I could not have made a stronger case. I could not have shown the Senate my love for my home, and your willingness to fight for our home, any more clearly. The Senate voted.

The petition was denied.

There is no time for self-blame in politics. Things are what they are, and we cannot dwell on them. It's one of the first lessons learned by anyone entering the political arena.

It's one I still haven't learned as well as I'd like.

My weakness -- and I tell you this now, Cularin, so that you will understand me all the better when the time comes to decide if I will continue to represent you in the Senate -- is that I love my home too deeply. Too completely. Any failure

is unacceptable to me, if it means my people will suffer. There can be no justification for suffering in Cularin. There can be no "acceptable" level of loss. But this is exactly what the Senate told me. "Cularin has taken losses, but every system has taken losses, and Cularin has managed to hold its own thus far without intervention. Be proud of your people, Senator Wren. You're right that they are the heart of the galaxy, but the heart must beat on its own. It must be trusted to keep up its rhythm. If you attempt surgery on a healthy heart, you risk the entire body, especially when there are other wounds that must be treated first."

In my pride, I represented you too truthfully. I could have downplayed your strengths. That is not, however, the way I view Cularin. The surest way for me to be voted out of office would be to call my people "weak" in order to bring outside forces to our aid.

Then I realized that the second surest way would be to fail to do whatever I can to keep you alive. In short, there is nothing I can do to extend my political career.

This realization freed me. I cannot possibly continue to represent Cularin if my focus is on my career. My career can rot. Elect me next time or don't. Right now, I can't say that I care. The only thing I care about is keeping my people alive and piloting our ship to safety.

I could have petitioned again immediately, but I knew the outcome of such a petition. It would be denied, and we would be on our own. Then, last week, I learned more of the leader of the Confederacy army, a general who seems to exist to kill Jedi. My heart nearly stopped. If the goal of this creature is to kill Jedi, then the single place where he can do the most damage is in our home. It wouldn't just be the Jedi who died, though. He would come with an army, and Cularin would be wiped from the galaxy.

It never crossed my mind that a third petition might be denied. The threat was so obvious, so direct, that there could be no way that a reasonable Senate could deny my request. I prepared my speech. I scrapped my speech. I prepared another, then a third.

When I stood before the Senate, I ignored everything I had written and I spoke from my heart. By now, you've seen the recordings. Most of the galaxy has seen the recordings. You know that I held nothing back.

I shouted. I stomped. I dared them to ignore our plight.

After I finished to a resounding silence, the Senate took my dare.

There will be no help from the armies of the Republic for Cularin. We will fight our own war, as we have always fought our own wars.

And we will win. Because we are Cularin. Because this is our home. I will continue the fight from here, but if the day comes that the battles reach your doorsteps, look for me. On that day, I will come home, and I will draw my blaster, and I will fight beside you.

On that day, and until that day, may the Force be with Cularin.

Displacement

In the complex politics of Cularin, everyone in the system has an equal voice. Even those who live outside the law can have a hand in shaping it, such as the crime lord Nirama. Living aboard his well-armed luxury transport in Cularin's asteroid belt, the wily Oblee criminal has a "special" relationship with law enforcement in the system. His presence has a remarkably calming effect on the illegal elements of Cularin, as he is well known for his intolerance of foolish or destructive behavior. Because of this, the legal forces of the system ignore his activities as long as he remains a pacifying influence.

Unfortunately for Nirama, there are powers moving in Cularin with little regard for either his influence or the law, powers that seek only one goal -- his destruction.

"I am going to say it again."

"I really wish you wouldn't."

Tendin Vought, or Razor to his employers and targets, sighed and looked at his annoying companion. There are a thousand reasons why Razor preferred working alone and now, after meeting Caranna, he had a thousand and one. Sure, she was attractive, but she lacked the one trait of indoctrinated Twi'lek women he appreciated most -- she was talkative. Very, very talkative. If she ever remained silent for five minutes, Tendin suspected the lavender-tinted woman's jaw would lock up.

That delightful thought was shattered by Caranna's high-pitched voice. "I have a bad feeling about this."

He wished he could have left her out of this. But the stark reality of the mission they were facing required that he have an ally. Even with her horrifically shrill voice and constant rattling, Caranna was one of the deadliest professionals he knew. Frell, she was one of the best hunters this side of Coruscant, and as much as he hated to admit it, he would need her help if he accepted the job.

If he decided not to accept, taking her out before she reached her fighter was a thought that made him feel warm inside. Of course, he'd have to strike from behind, but that's what he was best at. Caranna might be a good shot, but she couldn't hit what she couldn't see.

His fantasy was interrupted again, this time by the hiss of an opening door. One of their hosts strode into the room, metal feet clicking on the textured steel floor. A modulated voice echoed from the newcomer's reflective blue chassis. "Forgive the delay. We had to check our accounts before answering your question about the fee. We trust this number will satisfy your professional concerns."

Two smaller droids rolled over to them and handed each a small datapad. Razor noted the obscenely high figure with little more than a raised eyebrow, but his "partner" emitted a loud squeal of delight that made his hand instinctively twitch to his left-leg vibroblade.

"That is fantastic! You've got yourself a deal!"

The taller droid nodded its head, but held up one segmented hand. "We are quite pleased to hear it, but we require both of you to agree."

The Twi'lek woman sighed, but her long eyelashes batted in Razor's direction. "Oh come on, handsome. This is a frang of a good job. Challenging, rewarding, and we finally get a chance to work together!"

He ground his teeth, forcing his hand back onto the table. "Please stop shouting. I am only four feet away."

"My audio receptors are also quite acute, Lady Caranna. So acute, in fact, that I am certain I have not heard Master Vought's acquiescence to the mission. If it is a matter of funds, sir, I am authorized to increase the pay base by 20 percent

and permit both of you to receive 2,000 credits to an account of your choice up front."

"Master Vought" nodded after a moment's thought, frowning afterward. "First, call me Razor."

"So noted, Sir Razor."

Razor let that pass, having seen how difficult it could be to convince a droid to address anyone just by their name. "Second, the increased pay is nice, but for this job, I'll need a few more items."

The droid, whose designation had not been revealed to either of them, inclined its head. "As you wish. Name your terms."

Caranna sighed again, moving over enough to lean close and let Razor smell her horrok lily perfume. "Nice one, Razzie. You're a hard negotiator. I like that." She patted the back of his hand, a gesture he pointedly did not return.

Instead, he kept talking to the droid. "To start with, I want that fighter you have in the docking bay, slot 12. Mine is almost shot, and if I'm going to be tackling a star liner, I'll need the guns and missile rack I saw on it."

The droid paused for a moment, flickering lights in its optic visor indicating a remote communication. "Agreed. Our prototype fighter could use a field test, though we will have to make a small modification to allow an organic pilot. That is being attended to now. Anything else?"

The blade-covered bounty hunter nodded. "A pair of vibro-axes and a legal permit in case we have to move through a customs zone or blockade on our way to the target."

Again the droid's lights blinked for a minute. "Agreed. They will be loaded into your new fighter, and the permits will be transmitted into its on-board computer while you are in flight. Anything else?"

Razor nodded. "One last item. I need a sealed suit of powered armor and a jetpack. That fighter doesn't look like it contains an ejection seat. If I can remain mobile in space, I can still make a try at the objective."

This time, the droid's sensor lights blazed for nearly five minutes. While they did, Razor couldn't help but return the stare Caranna had been giving him since he'd begun talking. He looked into her purple eyes, disturbed at how intensely she was studying him. "What?" he asked with unveiled hostility.

"Just impressed. You really know how to squeeze the most out of every contract. I admire that. I really do." She smiled. "You are . . . magnificent."

Even detesting the woman, he found her interest alluring. "Well, I suppose -"

Then her face fell into a frown. "That's why I'm sorry I had to poison you." Caranna's hand turned over, revealing the small triangular drug patch in her palm. "I just can't work with someone who wants to put a dagger in my back."

Razor's blades were in his hands a moment later, but even as he raised them to strike, his vision blurred. It became intensely hard to breathe, and then he lost all sense of balance and tumbled out of the chair. He looked up at Caranna, but everything he tried to say fell through his lips as an incoherent babble. The world went dark and everything passed into silence.

When the droid host's lights stopped flickering and its attention returned to the chamber, Caranna was kneeling next to Razor's crumpled form. She gazed up at it impassively as she stuffed his weapons and gear in her flight bag. "Razor and I accept your proposal, assuming that last term has been approved."

The droid tilted its head and spoke. "It has, but Sir Razor seems to be . . ."

"Dead? Oh no, just mind-numbed." She stripped off the transfer patch from her palm and placed it in a plasteel case at her waist. "Do whatever you like with him. He'll be fine in a few days. By then, I'll have your job done and pick up my half of the reward. Oh, I'll take the new fighter. He can have my old one when he wakes up."

The droid followed her out to the landing bay, while others carried the insensate bounty hunter to the infirmary. "Is it not highly illogical to leave Sir Razor functional? He will certainly come after you to seek revenge for your actions."

Caranna winked at the blue-plated facilitator as she slung up into the streamlined prototype fighter. "I certainly hope so. Should make life

interesting." After a quick preflight to make sure the impressively rapid refit was working, she began to cycle her departure. "Is everything he asked for loaded onto this craft?"

The droid inclined its head several times. "Yes, Miss, including the armor and flight pack as requested. We can transfer your belongings to this starfighter if you wish to wait a moment."

Caranna lowered the canopy and continued speaking through an external port. "No, that's all right. He can have them. I think he'd look awfully cute in my dresses."

In response to her sudden fit of giggling, the droid simply stated, "Of course, Miss. I will be sure to relay that thought to him upon his recovery." It stepped away from the fighter as the sleek craft's engines began to glow. "We will transfer your half of the mission funds upon completion. Good fortune to you."

Caranna nodded and cut all communications as she angled the fighter out of the landing bay and bolted off into the void. Once she was away, the droid returned to the interior of the manufacturing complex. It did not understand organic behavior on occasion, and this certainly qualified as one of those times...

Ezil's Return

Hah! Had to know old Ezil wouldn't stay gone. All you folk running around, talking about war-this and war-that and gotta fight. You don't know nothing about war until you been captured, put in a dirty little room where you got nothing for company but the little bugs what try and live off your flesh, brought out and tortured and then thrown back in a stinky little hole. You gotta live a little before you figure out how precious life is. Me, I lived plenty, and then I got put in a place where I had to live some more. Now I'm done with that kinda living, ready to get back to the kind where nobody's looking to put red-hot poker in your eyes or start peeling the skin from your body.

You think I look pretty good, all things considered? Shows what you know. You look like a pile of mynock leavings, and you ain't seen half what I been through. If you're trying to say that old Ezil, he didn't get taken nowhere by no one, he

just run off and hid while the fighting was intense, then I gotta say that you got less sense than a Savrip at a buffet. S'nothing that shows on me right now. Nobody put out my eyes, nobody ripped off my skin -- but there was folks around me what got that treatment, and worse. Good people from hereabouts, Culariners through and through. Gone, now. Miss 'em, sometimes. Pretty glad they weren't me.

You wanna hear stories? You think maybe Ezil's fiddling with your robes? I got no cause to fiddle with anything, no reason to lie. I got took -- plain and simple -- and things got ugly. What I need now is another drink, so if you're wanting to hear what I got to say, you just go talk to that man behind the bar. Tell him to keep the ale flowing. I'll take it intravenous, if he's got the hookup. And as long as I got drink, I'll talk. But I need drink. Went a long time without it, and now that I got it again, I figure I might as well use it to dull all the hurting that's left.

That's more like it. You got style, I give you that. This is the good stuff, not that Rodian swill. You ever wonder what makes Rodians look all puckered all the time? It's that *poodoo* they call "ale" -- they drink it all the time and it just makes their faces get all twisty, like somebody painted them and tried to make 'em look even funnier than they already did. But yeah. You keep this coming and I'll talk your ear off.

All started with one of them Thaereian raids. Seemed to me like they was wanting to flex some muscle, just show folks who's boss. Seen it before. Not so much in Cularin, but other places, whenever there's a bunch of folk that nobody much cares for or respects, and those folks got guns, they figure they can just make folks care about what they got to say. They can make folks respect 'em.

Course, these are the folks what can't tell the difference b'tween respect and fear. I tell you what, I seen a lot of guys from Thaere, but I never seen one in that uniform that I figured, "I can respect him." Not taking anything away from that Dal'nay fella -- he got out when he could. They call him "traitor," but he always said Cularin was his home, so he'd've been more a traitor if he'd kept on doing what Thaere wanted him doing, if you ask me. But there's not much to say good about what he did before he took off their uniform. Just a spaceslug like the rest of 'em.

That's who grabbed me. Most folk already figured out that the ones what disappeared got taken by Thaere. It's what happens after that nobody's talking

much about, since until now, I can't think of a single person what got caught and came back to talk about it.

Now's the part where you say, "Old Ezil, he's just nuts. Thinks he's something special, he can outsmart those Thaereians while the rest of us just sit around and stare at our knees." Not so. I don't think I'm better or worse than any man, except maybe for folks what live in Thaere. Not that there's many what live in that pit, except in their bases. Near as I can tell, there's never been a real permanent settlement over there, just places to stage troops. Generation after generation. And they get to protect Cularin? Got to, leastways. Now, not so much.

What happened with me, to get me out, was I got lucky. Nothin' more or less. But that's the end of the story, and the way I figure, it's better to start at the beginning than at the end, even when you already got the end mostly puzzled out, what with me being back in Cularin.

There was about a dozen of us what got pinched that night. Just staggering around, minding our own business, when this Thaereian patrol wanders up. Now, this has got to be a year or more ago, understand, so things was a lot different then. At least, folks thought a lot different about what we were supposed to do, or not do. We were still convinced that working with Thaere was a good idea. Still letting ourselves be the happy little protectorate, for the most part.

These guys, they weren't in a "happy protectorate" place. They were angry, and it didn't seem like there was no good reason for them to be. They come up to us and they start talking -- shouting, more like. Shouting about how we didn't know law, how we didn't respect nobody, how if they weren't around, we'd be just another foul backwater pool.

Then they started in with the hitting. Just shoving, at first. Then there was some fists, and people getting whacked with the butt-end of a blaster rifle, and then somebody hits me over the head.

I swear to you, I wasn't swinging. Just standing there, mouth open wider'n a gooberfish after a Gungan baby, when someone tries to cave my head in. I still got the knot. Go ahead and touch it, but be gentle. I figure, something got fractured, and then I got no medical treatment, so it never did heal quite right. Still sore. When I sneeze, it kinda wiggles.

So I'm on the ground, watching big black-booted feet stomping on folks I just got done drinking with, and somebody steps on me. Just on the middle of my back, but that's bad enough since whoever it was felt like an obese Tauntaun. I think I lost most of the liquor from my system about then, and the last thing I remember before I passed out was lying there, my face getting wetter and stickier and smellier by the second, staring at Naiver Rekcus. He was staring back, except that I'm pretty sure he wasn't seeing much. Folk what're bleeding out the eyes, nose, and ears generally don't.

Next thing I remember is waking up in the dark. You wanna know what's scary? It's waking up in the dark, trying to open your eyes, and not being able to. You know it's dark on the other side of your lids, but you got no way to make 'em move, so you can't tell if maybe you got 'em open already, but there's nothing to see. Maybe you're just dead, and there's nothing to be done. Found out later they had me drugged up good, and there was no way I was opening anything. But when you can't open your eyes, it's not like you care if you can move your hands. Until you can crack those lids and see for yourself that there's something outside you, even if it's just shadows on a craggy black wall, there's nothing in the world but the trying.

It'd probably have been worse if I'd just been stuck there, not able to open my eyes, for a year. Maybe. I guess "worse" is hard to define, since they did everything from beat me with sticks to dress me up like a Twi'lek dancing girl. The less said about that, the better. But at least when they was doing that, I knew I was alive. Sometimes, it's the little things like that what keep you going. Yeah, I'm being humiliated. I'm less than a person when they do this to me. But at least I have a chance to get out of it. Dignity? Who needs it.

I waited, and after a while, I heard about this shuttle what was coming back to Cularin to pick up more recruits. I figured, I can get aboard that, I can get home. Be free again. So me and some other guys, we come up with this plan, and the plan's basically -- find out the schedule, kill some folks, get on the shuttle, steal it, fly away.

The details, we didn't so much know. We kinda played it as we went along. How it went . . .

Well, I'm here. I guess that's kind of the end of the story I was talking about. Look, I know you want details about how it happened, but this ale? Not quite

tasty enough for me to want to remember. Put it this way -- I made it back. But there was a dozen other Culariners what didn't.

Another day. Come back another day, buy me another drink, and maybe we can talk.

Tramsig's Plan

A year ago, a document was posted to Cularin's holonets which, if true, made clear Thaere's intentions with regard to Cularin. The destabilization spoken of in the document -- specifically by Admiral Jir Tramsig -- failed to materialize in quite the way the Thaereians might have hoped (assuming, again, that the document was real), due in no small part to public awareness of the plan's existence. Before the plan could be fully realized, Cularin struck at their protectors, forcing a conflict that many now view as having been inevitable.

Today, a recording was released to Cularin's major media outlets. The release has already garnered a great deal of attention...

Interior, Cularin Central Broadcasting Studios

Yara Grugara sits behind the newsdesk. She is impeccably coiffed and composed, but a smile seems to tug at the corner of her mouth. She folds her hands very deliberately in front of her, glances at her prompter, and speaks.

Yara: Friends, this is Yara Grugara, with a critical news development. Less than an hour ago, Cularin Central Broadcasting received a recording of two voices talking about Cularin and our sovereignty. An accompanying note identified one of the voices as belonging to Thaereian Admiral Jir Tramsig, the individual in charge of Thaere's Navy. The other voice was not identified, and appears to have been masked.

The image of a box covered in plain brown paper fills the screen. The ends of the box have been very carefully cut off, and a recording stick sits beside the box.

Yara (voice-over): Thus far, no group or individual has claimed credit for providing this recording to us. Because we could not initially determine the identities of the parties involved to 100 percent accuracy, Cularin Central

Broadcasting delayed sharing the recording with you. However, our technicians have conclusively determined that one of the voices on the recording definitely belongs to Admiral Tramsig. The content of the recording makes it such that we cannot justify failing to share the information.

The box and recording stick disappear, and we again see Yara behind the newsdesk. Her face becomes very grim, and her voice drops as she adopts her "serious broadcaster" persona.

Yara: The conversation is not pleasant. If you are easily angered, please, watch this segment later. It's easy to come away from it with a fairly strong bloodlust. Yara certainly did.

The screen goes black, and then the following words appear: "This recording has not been modified in any way from its status upon receipt by Cularin Central Broadcasting. We have provided a transcription to accompany the conversation, to better enable our viewers to understand the context and implications of the words they will hear. In this transcription, 'JT' refers to Thaereian Admiral Jir Tramsig, while 'UI' refers to the unidentified individual with whom Tramsig is conversing."

UI: Things in Cularin don't seem to be going particularly well. I'd hoped that you might have settled them by now.

JT: There were some wrinkles. We've managed to smooth them out. I think you'll see that everything is running according to plan once more.

There is a shuffling, as of one or both of the individuals sitting down, followed by the squeaking of the metal feet of a chair along a tile floor. Someone sighs.

UI: If everything were going according to plan, Cularin would no longer be resisting.

JT: Cularin is not your typical target, sir. They have a long history of being difficult to deal with. They fight back if it looks like they're being controlled, even if it's for their own good. They have no appreciation for the opportunity they have to move from a lawless system of malcontents to a peaceful, law-abiding member of the new order.

UI: You seem to forget to whom you are speaking. I've told you before -- I hate being called "Sir." And if you decide to tell me about my own plan and its brilliance one more time, I may be forced to harm you. Severely. Permanently.

Someone coughs. Several seconds of silence pass, and even in a voice-only recording, there's clearly tension between the two speakers. Someone shifts in his seat.

JT: I am what I am. I apologize if calling you "Sir" offends you.

UI: No matter. You're right that Cularin was never meant to be an easy mark, but they were meant to be a mark, and one that could be accomplished well before now. I hope I didn't make a mistake by leaving things in your hands. There were others to whom I could have turned, but you convinced me that you and your navy would be best suited to the task. I'm still not quite sure why.

JT: We know Cularin, sir. We've observed them and controlled their trade for three generations. Their borders have been under our control since well before we were granted protectorate status. All of it leading to this moment.

UI: "This moment" passed some time ago. You were supposed to eliminate Cularin. Have you forgotten? They are to be a non-issue. With their pedantic Jedi and their self-proclaimed "heroes," the system should have remained wherever it was when Rivan's toy sent them away. If it had never returned, the galaxy would have been no worse a place.

JT: I agree completely.

UI: Of course you do, you fool. It's what you do -- agree with your betters. Rather than simply agreeing, answer me one question. I'd advise you to answer it appropriately.

JT: Yes?

UI: How will you fix this mess that you have made of Cularin? How will you quell a revolution that should never have had a chance to exist, let alone grow to this magnitude?

JT: If nothing changes, then I'll kill them.

UI: All of them?

JT: All of them.

UI: Good.

With a "click," the recording ends. Yara and the newsdesk reappear. She isn't even trying to smile, and the flush in her cheeks makes her opinion of what we just heard extremely obvious.

Yara: The reactions to this recording have come quickly. The following statements have been received by Cularin Central Broadcasting after we provided copies of the recording to key individuals throughout the system and beyond.

Interior, Almas Jedi Academy

Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk sits at his desk, hands folded beneath his chin. Responding to a cue we can't hear, he looks up at the holorecorder and speaks.

Lanius: There is no reason to mince words. Whatever else may have happened of late, the Jedi will fight to protect Cularin and her people. If Thaere believes they can kill all of us, they are sadly mistaken. If they believe they can kill all the Jedi, they are likely also mistaken. The Force will be with Cularin, Thaere will be defeated, and Cularin will be free once more.

Exterior, Hedrett Groundport

Governor Barnab Chistor of Gadrin and Senior Counselor Westa Impeveri of Hedrett stand side by side outside the entrance to the groundport. OPS officers flank them. Some of the officers watch the skies.

Chistor: If there is to be a final push made by Thaere, Cularin stands ready to meet it. OPS, working with the Militia, will repel any large-scale ground assault on the planet, just as we are certain the Jedi will repel any ground assault on Almas.

Impeveri: Thaere seems to believe that Cularin is weak. We are not now, nor have we ever been, weak. While Governor Chistor and I may see differently on political matters, we agree that no invading force is going to destroy our homes or further endanger our people. We will not be leaving Cularin. We will

stay and direct operations of our respective cities, doing everything in our power to ensure that whatever Thaere attempts, Cularin will retain the necessary leadership to survive and prosper.

Chistor: Our aides will remain with us. If either the Counselor or I should fall, there will still be those who can help to lead Cularin forward.

Interior, Militia Command Center

Commanders Osten Dal'nay and Broof Yurdel stand in front of a map of the Cularin system. Both wear their combat fatigues. Osten has a slow, deadly smile on his face. Part of Broof's face is bandaged, and a fresh-looking burn scar covers the right half of his neck.

Osten: The Cularin Militia stands ready to face any threat that might be posed by Thaere. We will continue to fight as we have fought them from our inception. They have never been welcome in Cularin, and never will be.

Broof: Wesa gonna take da bombad Daere and kick dem right outsa Cularin. Deysa never gonna know what hits dem! Wesa shown' da whole galaxy dat Cularin, she's not gonna die! No way, boss.

Osten: If Tramsig thinks he can walk into Cularin and blithely kill us all, he has another thing coming. However, you don't become an admiral, even in Thaere, without having your synapses firing most of the time. I ask all the people of Cularin to be on the lookout for suspicious persons or vehicles. Wholesale slaughter with blasters may not be what Tramsig and his goons have in mind. It's up to all of us to keep Cularin safe and to keep a watchful eye on our streets. We have experienced great tragedies in the past few months. Let's not give Tramsig the opportunity to visit an even greater tragedy upon us.

Interior, Senator Wren's Office, Coruscant

Senator Lavina Wren stands behind her desk, her cheeks bright red and her lips pressed together. She leans forward, arms stiff against her desk, her knuckles white from the pressure she's putting on them.

Wren: Citizens of Cularin, be strong. Know that I am doing all I can here on Coruscant, and that if Thaere tries anything as extreme as what is hinted at in this message, there will be consequences. By the time the forces of the

Republic are done with them, it will be as if Thaere never existed. You have my word on this. May the Force be with us, Cularin.

Interior, Cularin Central Broadcasting Studios

Yara sits at her desk. She shuffles papers, looks at the prompter, and nods.

Yara: Clearly, there will be updates to this story as we obtain them. There is no way for us to know how old this recording is, or what the actual plans might be. We cannot even be sure who the second speaker is, though a number of theories have already begun to surface in other outlets. As ever, Cularin Central Broadcasting will bring you further updates as they become available. We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming.

Standoffs

All across the Cularin system, battles are fought for a hundred different reasons. Protecting the forests, droid rights, freedom from Thaere, and the growing specter of the Clone Wars have pitted the once-peaceful settlers of this system against a myriad of foes from without and within. Some of these conflicts are bloodless, fought with legal wit and verbal skills in the boardrooms of the Senate. Others are far more violent, with death and destruction their only resolution...

"So what you are saying is this isn't going well? Really?"

Darrus glanced around at the glowing blaster holes in the metal craters around them and chuckled darkly. "Yes, sarcastic one. That's exactly what I was saying. We need to fall back and rethink our tactics."

On his other side, a voice remarkably similar to Trilinae's echoed from behind a stack of cargo boxes. "I can see what you see in him, Tril. He's using that Jedi power of 'state the fragging obvious' again!" Dropping another power cell into her rifle, Milinae rolled to one end of the stack and laid down a hissing stream of red blaster bolts.

It bought them just enough time for Master Jeht to throw Trilinae the pouch of cells from his belt. She shot him a grateful look, and then slapped them

expertly into the receptacles on her heavy blasters. Popping up over her cover just high enough to give her pistols clearance, she nailed two of their assailants in the chest with a pair of blasts each. It was not enough to drop either of them, but deadly energy flared over both foes and tore holes in their armor.

"Okay, sis! They're open! Aim for the gaps in their chest plates!"

Milinae stopped firing and looked at her twin in disgust. "Do I *look* like a sniper to you? Why do you think I carry this rifle, Tril? I am all quantity, *not* quality!"

Darrus sighed, know full well how to extract himself from the middle of yet another argument between these two. "Right now, I'd take either. Excuse me." With that, he leapt over the crate, spiraling in midair to bat down two blasts with his violet lightsaber, and landed in front of their attackers. "Get to the ship!"

Trilinae stared at him in disbelief. "You mean after everything we've been through on this planet, we're just going to cut and run?" As she spoke, her sister grabbed her by the shoulder and started dragging her to the flight deck of the outpost.

"Nope! We aren't even going to wait around long enough to cut!"

Darrus allowed himself a small smile as he heard Milinae say that. "That's not entirely true," he murmured as the first of the enforcers reached him. He parried another short-range blast from one of the combat droids and followed up with a triple slash that left its limbs and neck neatly severed. Even as the battle construct rained in pieces to the ground, two more moved up to take its place. "I may be a minute," he shouted over his shoulder at the retreating pair of Corellians. Then he was a blur of purple light and shearing metal.

Trilinae and Milinae ran as quickly as they could, with Tril looking back in obvious distress. "He'll be okay, sis," Milinae told her as they fled down the access hall. "It'll take more than a handful of battle bots to take down mister tall, dark, and broody, you know."

Their wrist communicators flashed as R-0, far ahead of them in the docking bay, started listing the number of opponents that were chasing them and how many of them were armed with heavy weapons or trained in anti-Jedi tactics. As the total entered the double digits, Milinae smashed Tril's display with her

own -- shattering both screens. "See," she gave her panicked sister a forced half-smile, "no problem."

They reached the ramp leading up to the docking bays and skidded to a dead stop. At the top of the ramp, a trio of thick-bodied Trandoshans waited with repeating blasters. The sisters dived behind a computer terminal to avoid detection, but the onslaught of blaster fire told them otherwise. Quick thinking on Trilinae's part set up a jamming wave to keep the Trandoshans from calling for help, but she and her twin were outnumbered and outgunned as it was.

"Isn't it great how this night keeps going from bad to worse?" Milinae sighed and checked her empty grenade belt for the twentieth time. As with the last nineteen, it was still barren, though she did find a stick of chewing root stuck in a side pocket. She took it out and bit into it. The root was sour, having gone off a long time ago. "Perfect," she said with a groan. "I wonder if we'll get hit by a moon next."

Behind them, they heard the sound of Jeht's battle coming slowly closer. He was still alive, but he was obviously getting pressed back by the numbers. "Got any bright ideas, oh sister?"

Trilinae nodded slightly. "Maybe -- hush and let me concentrate."

Any irritation Mil might have expressed at being told to shut up was silenced by a renewed salvo of blaster fire hitting the console at their backs. The Trandoshans had all gathered at the top of the ramp and were trying to blow through their cover. From the heat emanating off the metal of the computer bank, it seemed to be working. "Now would be a good time!"

Trilinae ignored her sister's panic and tried to suppress her own. She was still very new to the Force, but Darrus had expressed his surprise at how well it flowed through her on more than one occasion. Now it was time to see if all his mystic babble was worth the spit on a mynock. She reached out with her thoughts and envisioned her surroundings in her mind. With that done, she steeled herself for the hard part. She'd only ever done this successfully once and never in the middle of a firefight.

Milinae looked at her sister, who seemed to be taking a nap. "Fine time to rill out, dimwit," she hissed as she ducked around to take a strafing pass at the Trandoshans. Just as she expected, not a blessed shot actually came close to them. What she could not expect was what happened next.

Above the heads of the Trandoshans, a hanging platform piled with steel beams began to sway. As Milinae watched in disbelief, the release handle on the platform began to twist and open. One of the alien gunmen had the presence of mind to hear the metallic squeal of the vise as it came open, but that awareness was not enough to save him as tons of construction girders smashed down in a deadly rain of steel and scales.

Milinae winced at the echoing crunch of bone and flesh. "Okay, sis," she murmured breathlessly as she made sure there was nothing hanging above her own head. "I take the dimwit back."

Even as she spoke, a flutter of black robes came into view. Master Jeht was running far faster than anyone had a right to, leading a trio of heavily armored gunners. Though he was not looking back, his lightsaber was swinging at an awkward-seeming angle, knocking blaster bolts back at his attackers. Before he reached the spot where Milinae and her exhausted sister were crouched, one of Darrus' foes was already on the ground -- the victim of his own carbine shot.

Then he was past the twins, and his assailants were completely unaware of their presence. Milinae whispered a silent prayer of thanks to the gods that watched over fools, pilots, scoundrels, and Corellians in way over their heads. Then she stood up and poured the last of her rifle's power pack into a flurry of blazing death, screaming all the while.

When her gun stopped glowing and her voice gave out, she was staring into the vile, grinning face of a Weequay warrior and down the barrel of his impossibly large blaster. She smiled sweetly, waved hello, and tried to dive for cover in sheer panic. But she knew she could not move fast enough to save herself. It had been a brief life, Milinae thought, but a fun one.

Fortunately, she did not have to save herself. As she dove, a shaft of purple erupted from the warrior's chest in the same moment that heavy blaster fire drilled a hole through his leering smile. When the Weequay crumpled, Milinae stood back up to see Jeht and Tril standing on either side of her. "You happen to find your pride down there on the floor, sis?"

Milinae shook her head. "Nope, lost that ages ago. Can we leave now?"

As they moved quickly to the end of the docking ramp and into the ship bay itself, Jeht listened as the twins plotted out which ship they were going to

steal, how best to steal it, and whether they had time to check cargo manifests to make sure they could make a decent profit this time.

Normally, he would advise them against such an action, but given that everything they'd owned had been destroyed by the mysterious gangster "R" when the twin's ship had been blown to shreds, he felt the universe owed them this one. They had not been able to learn R's identity, but they knew with reasonable certainty that everything on and around this station belonged to him. Or *her*, Jeht corrected himself; there was no way to be sure of R's gender. As such, it was more recompense than theft.

Besides, there were no used spacecraft left back in the Cularin system. They had all been purchased or requisitioned by the Militia. Only new vessels were available, and neither of his companions had that kind of wealth. It was a shame, honestly. Trace Polters was a good man, but he just could not come up with ships that did not exist. With establishments like Trace's Ma'Haffee Shipyards unable to provide used starships, people were sometimes -- like now -- forced to seek other methods of procurement. Desperate times called for drastic actions.

At least, that's what he told himself while the women stared at a sleek star yacht with an angular hull that looked more like a hematite shark than a spaceship. In unison, they shouted, "Mine!" and raced each other for its boarding ramp . . .

Disapproval

There are many stories to be told in the Cularin system, most of them featuring heroes and the brave decisions made in the growing time of crisis. Unfortunately, there are also tales of darkness and dishonor. The Jedi of Cularin have a mandate from the Force and their mentors to protect all life, but, like all mortal beings, some fall off the path of the righteous at times. When they fall too far, they become a dangerous embarrassment -- one that must be dealt with.

We'd just come down from a Militia patrol, and all any of us wanted was a quiet night at the Crosstown, downing suds and Rodian ale until we passed

out. That was a laudable goal, one my flightmates and I planned since our last sweep took us past Almas and back through the asteroids.

According to the local crowd, we'd managed to avoid all the fuss that happened in the bar while we were away. The Nder's house getting demolished and Lx going off the deep end -- that sounded intense. The group of Jedi, many of them Masters, who tried to help and got essentially run out of the bar -- frell. I may not always agree with that robed lot, but I know better than to get in their faces, especially with the war going on and that hunter thing killing them all. I figure they got enough stress, you know?

Speaking of stress, no sooner do we sit down and get our drinks than Dag starts in with politics. "Could we can the serious talk for just one frakking night?" I ask him. He nods, like he's finally gotten a clue, and starts drinking. I should have known it wouldn't last.

"So, like I was saying," he starts up again after a couple of minutes, "I don't think the Separatists have the wrong idea. I mean, yeah, *Holonet News* paints them pretty dark, sure, but there isn't a shred of real proof. They just want to be free, right? Who doesn't want that? The Republic sure isn't free."

There he went, as always. After the usual rounds of talk about the Separatists and their killer droids, the Republic and their Jedi, and the fact that all we wanted was to be left alone, this guy in a flight suit turns to us and says, "Don't talk about the Jedi as if you know us. We have suffered more than anyone in this war." Then Dag comes out with one of those lines that remind us why we like having him as our wing mate.

"Right," he says to the guy's face. "Mister Flight Suit with a blaster on each hip and a belt full of grenades. Lecture us about the plight of the Jedi when you've got the guts to dress like one, mate."

So this guy's hand twitched toward his blaster, and I thought that was going to be the end of us. Thugs with laser swords aren't well known for their stability and respect for people's opinions, if you know what I mean. It probably would have been curtains for all of us -- Dag especially -- but then this robed bloke showed up at the door to the Crosstown. The pilot-Jedi just looked at him, and after a few seconds, he sort of sulked and left the bar.

The one in robes tossed a few credits on the bar to cover the Jedi's tab. A tab, I might add, that included a few seriously brain-hammering drinks. I'm sure not

up on Jedi training, but I don't think they're supposed to go around sloshed. In the Militia, we have to hang up our gun belts if we want to get a good shine on, but Jedi frelling *are* weapons, you know? Just seems unprofessional for them to knock back the hard stuff in public.

Well, that harsh scene done, I turned back to convince Dag to let the politics go for just one night. Only he wasn't there, and neither was my flight team. They were all heading around the back of the bar. I wasn't going to drink alone, so of course I followed them out the back door. "'What are we doing?" I asked real quiet like.

Dag answered me with a much louder voice. "I wanna see if that Jedi guy gets called down on account of him threatening us." No tact at all, that man.

"No way, Dag -- that's the kind of thing they only do on their private little planet." I rolled my eyes. "They're too good for us common types to stick around here."

But I was wrong. In the alley beside the cantina, the two Jedi were standing and arguing. They were behind a wall of bins and refuse dumpsters that I could've sworn weren't there when we got to the Crosstown, shielded from sight in every direction except ours. To be honest, only Master Flight Suit was arguing. The other one seemed to be real patient. He didn't raise his voice once, not even with what happened next.

"What do you know, *sir*?" the other Jedi shouted sarcastically. "Word is that all you did was cover up evidence at the manor the other night. Even Nder's widow said so! So get off your high and mighty speeder. I know all about you!"

I gotta hand it to the other Jedi; he played it real cool. If anyone had spat in my gob like that, I'd have given him an all-expense paid trip to the Outer Rim, courtesy of my combat glove. Instead, the robed Master just said, in that same unnatural calm voice, "I am going to forgive this outburst, Knight. You are obviously inebriated and need some time to relax."

"Knight? " The drunken Jedi shook with rage, an anger so thick we could feel it all the way back where we were hiding. "I am a Master, you . . . you . . ."

The Jedi in robes shook his head. "Not when we get back to Almas. I think you need more training. I have also made the mistake of fraternizing too closely with those we are here to protect. You will understand in --"

He was interrupted when the furious Jedi scooped a lightsaber off the belt on his right leg and raised it to attack. "Not a chance. I know what you are, you bloody Si --"

Then there was a rustle of robes and a streak of purple light. It happened so fast that I don't think any of us, not even Colnor with that cybernetic eye of his, knew what had happened until we saw a flight suit sleeve cuff hit the ground, the Jedi's hand still in it. His lightsaber, which hadn't even been ignited yet, clattered down beside it.

I could swear the bins and dumpsters were shaking now. The robed Master, still in that incredibly calm voice, looked down at the wounded Jedi with no trace of mercy or regret. "Please make your choice, Padawan. You have three. Return with me to Almas, leave the Order and remain here, or lose your other hand by doing what you are thinking about." He then added, stooping to touch the guy's wrist -- I suppose to heal it -- "Please decide quickly. If you pass out from shock, I will assume you have chosen Almas."

My mates and I were stunned. We weren't sure what we were seeing. I mean, the attack surely was provoked and I would've testified to that, but -- frell! Couldn't the man have cut the kid a break and just sliced his lightsaber in half? Did it have to be his hand? As a pilot, that hits awful close to home.

Anyway, next thing we knew, the kid was walking dejectedly out of the alley toward what we assumed to be the Master's speeder. Then the Master Jedi picked up the severed hand and the dropped saber. He got to his feet and started toward the mouth of the alley himself. Then he stopped and turned back to look right at us. I mean like right into our eyes.

I've seen the business end of a bank of turbolasers, and I've never been as scared as I was when that Jedi looked at me. No, not *at* me, but *into* me. It was like he wasn't staring so much as studying our souls. I'm not much for colorful words, but if there was ever a hand of death, I could feel it closing around my heart.

He didn't come for us the way I feared he would. Instead, he just bowed his head and said softly, "Forgive the trouble. I have darkened this place too often. It will not happen again." The voice was quiet, but even with the traffic nearby, none of us had trouble hearing him. Then he was gone, his silver speeder driving past the alley and away into the evening.

After that, we all had a good long drink. And then another. And then we lost count. The next thing I remember, Dag broke the silence. Trust good old Dag, with that ridiculous hat that looked like a womp rat turned inside out, to heal from emotional trauma like a rancor from a thrown rock. "So, like I was saying, if the Separatists are as bad as you all pretend they are, I'll eat my hat and retire to Tatooine."

Just then, the Holonet on the wall beside us started showing pictures of devastation. Beneath the images was a caption that said, "Battlefield: Cerea: Separatist forces destroy military base and surrounding civilian city. Death toll estimated at more than 1,000,000."

Dag just stared at the screen. Cerea is his homeworld. He knew that place, knew that the images weren't fake.

I know I should have been sympathetic, but I was still so emotionally stunned. All I could do was slide my mug over to him and say, "So, Daggath Darklighter, you want something to wash down the fur?"

To this day, I still haven't been invited to visit his moisture farm.

Reprieves

There are creatures of such darkness, such terror, that their very presence is a blight to nature itself. None are as horrible as those that were once part of the cycle of life, beings that had been embraced and beloved of the living Force only to turn their backs on it and betray everything that had believed in them. On Cularin, such a creature now roams the jungles she once called home, stalking prey she cannot be allowed to find.

It was easy, she thought as she glided over the grasses at the foot of the t'chira trees without disturbing a single blade. She truly had become more powerful. The Wyrds were the strongest force in the jungle because they had abandoned their weak, old ways of supplication and grasped the truth. Nature exists only to serve those with the will to force what they want from it.

Was this not true with every other living creature on Cularin, even the pathetic Tarasin themselves? Strong animals kill weaker ones and feast upon them,

making themselves even stronger and ensuring survival of their own kind. In this way, the Wyrd survived and grew more powerful with each passing day.

They had suffered losses, surely, but they were not defeated. That further proved their right to dominance. The ancient ways of the Tarasin would soon be swept away, and they would see the power of the Force. She, Kirasha, a mere Human, was swayed, and she was now an utterly devoted servant of the Wyrd; certainly, the Tarasin would understand once their obstacles such as Darianna and the Jedi were destroyed.

Age was handling the first obstruction, and their internecine fighting and foolish war would annihilate the second. Without their misguided efforts, nothing would stop the Wyrd from commanding the entire system and then, someday, the galaxy. How could it not be so?

While age would soon catch up to the doddering Mother of the Hironi, the true leader of the Wyrd had sensed a sharp decline in the power of the Tarasin shamen loyal to Darianna. Kirasha felt pride in receiving the assignment to investigate the cause for the drain in their energies. She hoped to exploit it to deal with the Mother once and for all. If she could have formed tears, Kirasha would have cried over the great honor this mission implied.

However, four days after being assigned this task, Kirasha was closer to weeping with frustration. There was no sign of a ritual even being performed, much less its cause or its purpose. She had circled the Hironi holy sites along with the circles belonging to every tribe not already under the Wyrd's sway. They all seemed either abandoned or infrequently used.

There were an abnormal number of somewhat fresh tracks near the most remote ceremony circle of the Hironi irstat, but there were far too many for a ritual group. Even the weakest student of Tarasin lore knew that the species performed combined rituals only in their distant past; the lore was lost to the current generation.

Still, her tracking skills kept leading her back to the circular mound and its ring of great stones. So here she was, staring into its confines as if the answer were written on the stones but only visible to those who looked long enough. When that failed, now for the fifth time, Kirasha stalked like a lithe jungle cat into the circle and sat down. Though she hated the introspective quiet that came with meditation, she had run out of options and knew better than return to the Wyrd in defeat.

The darkness poured over her like a wave. She was back in her foster home in Hedrett, standing over the bodies of her "replacement family." She did not feel a drop of regret, even for the other children that were so cruel to her. At least, that was what she told herself every time she closed her eyes. Perhaps this frailty was the weakness she was warned about; this was likely the compassion that kept her from achieving the true power she craved. Try as she might, she could never escape their faces in the dark. Their agony... their young, betrayed eyes...

Youth! Her mind seized on that image and started to lead her away from the circle. Though she was not physically moving, Kirasha could feel her muscles straining against the tight leather of her hunting suit as if she were running, almost as if she was trying to escape herself. In her mind's eye, she could see a trail winding through the trees away from the ceremonial site and into the deepest heart of the jungle.

She sat in the center of the standing stones, not moving and with her eyes closed, swaying back and forth as she followed her vision. As she did, a second figure entered the clearing. Also dressed in black and also Human, he moved as silently as a shadow toward her. One hand tightened on a soft silver rod, one gloved finger on a dark button near its leading end. If she had been aware of his presence, Kirasha would have admired his stalking technique.

He watched her, studying the woman intently. There was no doubt she was of the Wyrde; he had fought them often enough to know the signs. He knew what he had to do, but he could not bring her down like a coward. He would at least face her; he would at least give her peace without striking like an assassin. With regret, the man ignited his lightsaber, bathing the nearby stones with a violet glow.

Kirasha remained intent on her vision quest. She could see trees she recognized now, curling branches leading inexorably to only one place in the jungle. The Force was guiding her down the path to the Spirit Tree, the largest tree on all of Cularin. She was completely oblivious to her physical body, the sound of the lightsaber's hum and the threat posed. She was so close to the truth behind the Tarasin's plans, the scheme that was leading them to sacrifice so much of their power. She did not hear the descending wail of the energy blade as it swept toward her neck.

And there it stayed, a few inches from slicing through the defenseless woman's flesh. The man knew he had to do this, had to stop her from discovering what the Tarasin, Master Lanius, and he were working so hard to accomplish. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives were at stake.

But he just could not do it. He could not murder someone, no matter how evil they might be or how important the act.

On the other hand, he told himself, lightsaber thrumming in his grasp, it would be quick. She would not suffer; that was far better than what could be said for the victims of the Wyrd. How many had this one sacrificed in the soul-rending rites of that dark cult? Mercy was better than she deserved; as a Jedi, it was also his duty to save others from those who would abuse the power of the Force. He did not want to do this, but he had to, and he knew it. There was no choice. He raised his weapon to strike again.

And Kirasha saw it. Her gaze was drawn below into a cavern beneath the great tree. Her sight penetrated soil and stone and emerged in a massive chamber. There, she saw them. Dozens, each one with the same eyes as her family so long ago. Afraid, hiding, protected. The warmth! It was a shelter, a welcome like none she had ever known.

No... that was not true. She had known it once. She had known it and turned her back on it. She had been given a second chance at a family, and her resentment at needing anyone or anything shredded her one chance at happiness. It was not their fault. They were never cruel. It had been her. They offered love, the kind of love she could feel in this cave, and she returned only death.

In the light of his saber, the man took one last look at her before performing the execution. He whispered a prayer he did not understand in a language he could not actually speak for her soul. Just as he began to strike, the flickering purple radiance reflected off her face. The light reflected off her -- tears? He forced himself to hold back the killing blow and looked again. She was weeping. The Wyrd adept's cheeks were wet with tears.

She opened her eyes to meet his. She knew he was there and understood exactly what he meant to do. Kirasha nodded once and turned her head to the side, tilting it to reveal the side of her tattooed neck. "Do it," she said, her voice thick with self loathing and regret for so many wasted years.

The Jedi stepped back, shock and bewilderment fighting for space in his ebon eyes. "No. I can't." His finger fell away from the switch on his weapon, and its violet blade vanished instantly. Alone in the clearing with her, he sank to his knees in front of her. As the sky opened up and began to rain, he looked into her eyes. They flashed with every violent bolt of lighting that crashed overhead. "Why?"

Kirasha shook her head. "I do not know." Her voice had a tone that let him know instantly -- she was not answering his question directly. She was talking about her entire life, not just this night. She was lost, utterly adrift in the Force and yet closer to the light than she had ever been in her life. He knew exactly what she was feeling.

And he knew exactly what to do. He rose, shadow-black robes clinging to his body from the downpour and extended his hand. "You saw it, didn't you?"

She nodded mutely. Then, after staring at his hand for a long while, she answered hoarsely, "Would you..." Her eyes were those of someone knowing full well that they were unworthy of being granted the thing they wanted most in life.

He smiled as much as he ever did, perhaps as much as he ever could. "Take you there? Give you a place there?" When she nodded again and lowered her gaze to the pooling mud under his feet, the Jedi reached down and lifted her chin. "Of course. I think that is truly the reason I was drawn here tonight. You belong there."

Kirasha felt a surge of unfamiliar joy burn through her. As she took his hand and they disappeared into the jungle together, she began stripping off everything given to her by the Wyrđ. The past was dead and could never be forgiven, but she could at least enter the future washed clean by the rains of Cularin.

The Oblee

Yara Grugara sits in the middle of an enormous soundstage. Behind her is the viewscreen to end all viewscreens -- twenty meters high and thirty meters wide,

and occupied by the image of a stylized "N." Yara twists in her chair, looks up at the N as if expecting it to change, and then turns her attention to the camera.

Yara: Friends, this is Yara Grugara. Today, I have the opportunity to do something I never thought I'd do again. I'm going to interview Nirama, the local crimelord, overseer of scum and villainy in Cularin. While there can be no doubt that Nirama has played a role in recent events in Cularin, he has specifically asked that we focus today's discussion on the Oblee, whom he calls his "people." Being as this was the only criterion Nirama set for doing the interview -- aside, of course, from the interviewer being none other than Yara herself -- and being as Yara's producers really wanted this interview to happen, I've agreed to his terms.

She shifts in her seat, again glancing up at the N. It hasn't changed.

Yara: For security reasons, Nirama won't be in the studio today, but we have a remote connection that should be active any moment. In the meantime, I feel obligated to point out that it is only through the inestimable kindness of Nirama that this interview is possible. In previous interviews, Yara may not have carried herself as professionally as she could. For that, I apologize, both to the people of Cularin, and to Nirama. Or at least, I will as soon as he gets here. Or the connection does. Or whatever it is we're waiting for.

Behind her, the N disappears. It's replaced with Nirama's face. His four eyes blink as one, and he glances down to where Yara is seated, still oblivious that the screen behind her has changed.

Yara: Happily enough, there's only so much groveling he can take before his top eyes start blinking faster than his bottom eyes. I still think that's interesting, but we're not going to mention that in the interview today because the last time I asked him about it, it kind of freaked him out.

Nirama clears his throat. Yara, who has been facing away from the screen, turns pale. Her eyes go wide and she forces a smile that makes her look like she's about to get an injection of the lethal variety and is trying to think happy thoughts. Slowly, she turns.

Yara: Hi! Gosh, is it nice to see you. Thank you for agreeing to this interview.

Nirama stares at her for a few seconds before nodding. He seems to have been waiting for her to make some vapid comment or other, and looks pleased that she apparently resisted that temptation.

Nirama: Hello. I am pleased to be back on "Eye on Cularin."

He puts a little more emphasis on "eye" than he probably should. Then, for emphasis, he blinks his top eyes, followed by his bottom eyes. It doesn't seem to faze Yara in the least.

Yara: Actually, I don't do that show any more. That's Ryk's, now.

Nirama: Is he not dead yet?

Yara: Not to my knowledge.

Nirama: A shame. Although Nirama must admit, it would be hard to tell. If death is the absence of brain activity, one might speculate that your replacement has been dead for some time.

Yara: True enough. So tell me, Nir. What is it you wanted to discuss?

Nirama: You may call me Nirama. Did we not discuss this before?

Yara: Yeah, but Lan told me that I ought to be more comfortable in my skin when I'm doing interviews. So I'm not going to put on airs. I'll just call people by their nicknames, because hey -- that's who Yara is!

Nirama: My nickname is not "Nir." I am called Nirama. And who is Lan, a producer?

Yara: Beg to differ, Nir. I gave you the nickname in that first interview. Believe you me, I saw it replayed enough that I couldn't possibly forget! As to who Lan is -- well, he's no less than the headmaster of the Jedi Academy. I thought you knew him.

Nirama: Fine. What you call me is of no import. I am here because I wish to speak of my people.

Yara: The smugglers, you mean?

Nirama frowns, the wrinkles in his face deepening. He shakes his head, slowly, and rolls his top set of eyes.

Nirama: My people. My species. The Oblee. Long have they been removed from the galaxy, and now have some of them returned. It is of them that I wish to speak.

Yara: I've heard a little about this. Some big to-do out in the Belt, right? Yara's heard a few stories, but to be honest, she's a little confused by what happened.

Nirama: She can join the club. What happened is not important in its details. What is important is that I am no longer the only one of my kind. Nirama is no longer alone, and this is a powerful, good thing.

Yara: Right. I guess it is. So, what can you tell Cularin about your people? I mean, if they're going to be making their way into our cities, what should we expect? Do they look like you? Do they talk like you? What is it that makes an Oblee tick?

Nirama: There are as many different faces for Oblee as there are for any species. Some will be like Nirama. Some will not. Some will be pleasant, others less so. I have not met many of my kin, so far. I hope to. I hope they will grow to love Cularin in the same way Nirama has come to love Cularin.

Yara: In a way that involves making money?

Nirama's twenty-meter-high face glares down at her. Yara shrinks in her chair, fumbling with the datapad in her lap.

Nirama: You seek to throw my previous interview back in my face, you wampa-furred harlot? Nirama said what Nirama had to say. When you become the leader of an underworld organization, please, tell Nirama how to engender loyalty. Tell him that the best way to encourage so-called "criminals" to follow him in the years after a strategic reorganization is to speak with affection of a star system in which they attempt to skirt what few laws exist. Convince Nirama that this would have been the proper way to speak two years ago.

Yara: So, what's changed?

Nirama: Everything has changed. I have shown force. I have demonstrated my commitment to my organization, and I have demonstrated my commitment to the system in which we live. There are some organizations in which a title is sufficient to garner respect, and too-free use of the title cheapens it. Any herder of nerfs can call himself a "crimelord." To maintain power, one must demonstrate that the title is deserved or, at least, that the power implied by the title is deserved.

Yara: I thought I heard subtext there. Care to elaborate?

Nirama: No.

Yara: Riiight. Anything else you want to say to the people of Cularin? We're a captive audience, after all.

Nirama: Be kind to the Oblee as you are kind to one another. That any of my people have found their way back to Cularin is due almost wholly to Cularin's heroes. Those who have assisted in this matter have my undying gratitude. But do not assume, and do not allow yourselves to be convinced, that any Oblee who transgresses is under my protection. Your kindness should not become foolishness. If an Oblee wrongs you, treat him as you would any other.

The Best Defense

The following story appeared on one of Cularin's holonet nodes. Originally uncredited, rumors quickly began to circulate that it was written by a young Osten Dal'Nay, long before he left the Thaereian Navy to assist in the construction of Cularin's Militia. Within hours, his name was affixed to the story. The appropriateness of doing so remains a matter of some debate.

In the dark, there is no difference between an enemy and a friend. In the midst of a firefight, a blaster bolt from your brother's carbine kills just as surely as a bolt from the followers of a Hutt. Life and death know no relations, never shake hands with you, never wait to see if their arrival is welcome or their departure serene. And the only thing any being can do, when the time comes, is his duty.

Duty, above all.

Nightwing sat on his bunk, disassembling and reassembling his blaster rifle for the fourth time since dinner. He had his legs curled beneath him, knees digging into the mattress, sending creases the length of his once-crisp top sheet. The bunk didn't matter. If he didn't sleep tonight, or if he slept on the floor, it wouldn't kill him. The bunk was a convenience. The blaster rifle, standard Thaereian issue MX9, was the difference between life and death. Only the rifle mattered.

The trigger was jamming, sticking on a bent wire or a spot of grease or something else that he hadn't found in any of his cleaning. Even now, as he slid the pieces of the barrel back into place, giving a quarter-twist to the anterior locking mechanism, he could tell something was wrong. There was grit in the twist, like a single piece of sand in your boot, digging its way through to your skin. Tiny, but no less of a problem because of its small size. He propped the butt of the rifle on his bunk, creating yet another crease he was loathe to let Sergeant Brik see, and checked the action of his trigger. It pulled smoothly enough, but when he released it, it half-jerked and half-slid back into position.

A quarter-twist in the opposite direction released the anterior lock and allowed him to strip the barrel into three parts once more. He laid them across the tan half-moon that served as the standard issue pillow for Thaereian enlisted men and set to disassembling the trigger mechanism once more.

"You, boy -- what do you do?" The voice was thick and phlegmy, with more than a trace of Huttese in its vowels. Nightwing looked up, trigger guard in one hand, trigger relay board in the other, and found himself facing a thick-joweled Nikto. The pale scar that dripped down the right side of his face made Nightwing think of an acid burn. The bars on the Nikto's shoulders made him think he ought to be saluting. So quickly that he almost upset the parts he'd spread around himself on the bunk, Nightwing was on his feet and at attention.

The Nikto -- a Commander, what was a Commander doing in the enlisted men's quarters? -- sighed, rolled his eyes, and scratched at the long, pale scar on his face.

"You speak?"

"Sir, yes sir, I do. Sir, I apologize for not noticing you came in, sir."

"You focus. I like focus. You try to fix blaster, yes?"

Nightwing glanced at his bunk. It hadn't looked that messy before an officer arrived. Had it?

"Yes, sir. My rifle and I were having a conversation, sir."

An eyebrow went up. "You talk to weapon. Is interesting." He held up a hand. "No more with the 'sir.' I am not come here to have you grovel. Is uninteresting, groveling. I come here because man who stays in quarters when squad on leave, he is not normal man."

Something about the Nikto's tone caught Nightwing off-balance, or if not off-balance, then at least unprepared. "Sir, I -- I apologize." Seconds. It had been just seconds since the Nikto told him not to call him "sir," and the first word out of his mouth had been exactly that.

"No apologies. No grovel. Just speak to me about your conversation. Why you speak to your rifle?"

Was this some sort of test? It had to be. Commanders didn't show up in the enlisted barracks without reason. He had to think quickly. What kind of test could this be?

"My weapon has been malfunctioning. When a weapon malfunctions, it's because there is something wrong with the man who carries it almost as often as the weapon itself." That didn't come out quite right. Sergeant Brik said it better. Of course, Sergeant Brik would have married his rifle had the Navy allowed such things.

"What is malfunction?"

Nightwing had to bite back the urge to say "sir" again. "The trigger has been jamming."

The Commander nodded. "You have cleaned the guard? Oiled the action? Filed the symon tube? Checked the lower quartile? Adjusted the mesobanis timer?"

He had. All of that and more, and everything twice.

"Tell me your name."

Nightwing told him.

"Then I will call you Nightwing. We have no rank here." He took off his uniform jacket and laid it across the foot of Nightwing's bunk. "I am Kulkis. I am soldier like you."

Despite his best efforts, Nightwing couldn't keep his mouth from falling open. Kulkis had command of the Bravedawn, one of the largest troop transports in all of Thaere. His reputation went beyond heavy-handedness; soldiers who had served under him called him "Cruel Kiss," since what seemed like fondness one moment could turn into harsh, unwarranted punishment the next.

If Kulkis noticed Nightwing's reaction, he gave no sign other than a guarded half-smile. He sat down on the edge of the bunk and began flipping the pieces of rifle in his hands, examining each in turn before commencing with a rapid-fire assembly of the weapon. He was done in seconds.

"Why do you join Navy, Nightwing?" Kulkis stared at the rifle, turning it over slowly in his hands. While he'd left the power cell sitting on the bunk, he kept his thick fingers away from the trigger all the same.

"To protect my home." It was the truth. No more, no less. He couldn't afford more or less; if he said too much, or just the wrong word, he might end up scrubbing latrines. Or worse.

"How do you protect?"

Nightwing searched his memory for the words he swore when he joined the Thaereian Navy. "I protect," he said, focusing on each syllable, "by putting myself between innocents and those who would harm them. I serve by allowing my life and my person to be sacrificed, if need be, so that others may live on. I am vigilant while worlds sleep. I am a guardian of borders and an upholder of laws. I am, and will always be, a faithful servant of Thaere and its protectorates."

The rifle bounced on the bunk when Kulkis dropped it and stood, spinning, to face the enlisted man.

"How do you defend?" he snapped. "You protect, you serve, you watch, you guard -- all of these things you do, how are they different than nothing at all?" He leaned closer. His breath stank of rotten meat and sour milk. "How do you defend?"

Nightwing didn't blink. "I defend by actively pursuing those who would harm others." He swallowed. "May I speak freely?"

"I am soldier, like you. Say what you want, soldier."

He took a deep breath. "If you know someone wants to kill you, you don't wait for them to try. You kill them first. If you know someone wants to harm the people or the place you're sworn to protect, you take the fight to them. It's very simple. You defend what you must defend by actively pursuing those who would do it harm." That was what they'd taught him in the Academy, and it made sense. If you could identify a threat, you dealt with it. The best defense was always offense. Always.

Kulkis tapped a thick-soled boot on the floor. "I wait," he said.

"For what?" He regretted the question almost immediately as he saw anger flash through the Nikto's black eyes.

"I wait," Kulkis growled, "for you to speak truth." He jabbed a finger into Nightwing's shoulder. "You parrot words you hear from officers, from instructors. You know what instructors know?" He poked again. Nightwing took a step back. "Instructors know to teach. This is all. And officers? Why you listen to officers? Officers command ships because ships, they all officers know!" He stepped up and put his horned brow against Nightwing's smooth forehead. Their eyes inches apart, he hissed, "How you defend against superior enemy?"

Then came the whisper, the soft sliding of steel across leather -- the sound of a knife being drawn.

Nightwing moved without thought as Kulkis's arm came up, driving the point of the knife at the back of his head. He twisted down and away, lashing out with his right hand to catch the Nikto's wrist and twist it, to wrench the knife free. The counterstrike from Kulkis's other hand caught him across the face, opened a gash on the bridge of his nose, but he didn't release the hand that held the knife. Using the momentum of the blow to his face, Nightwing spun back and down, sweeping the Nikto's legs from beneath him and sending the thick-bodied Commander to the floor.

For an instant, they both fell, the knife between them, their eyes locked.

Then came the ripping, wet and unpleasant. Then came the stillness. Nightwing looked down at the knife, buried in Commander Kulkis's abdomen, then into the Commander's fading eyes.

"How do you defend against superior enemy?" Blood bubbled between jagged lips.

"You wait until he moves," Nightwing said. His own voice sounded so far away. He knew he should get a medpac. He also knew it wouldn't matter. "When he overextends himself, you strike. Make his strength into his weakness."

A laugh brought more blood from Kulkis's mouth. "Is nothing wrong with man who wields rifle," he murmured, his voice fainter by the word. "Sometimes, is rifle who is wrong. Is broken. Sometimes . . . is better to not try to fix . . ."

The words stayed with Nightwing as he wrapped the Commander's body in a sheet and dumped him out the nearest airlock. He knew, as he watched Kulkis drift away, that the words would stay with him for a very long time.

Simplicity

There is a time and a place for all things in the galaxy, even in the looming shadow cast by the increasingly violent Clone Wars. In the darkest corners of space, there are still the faint glimmers of distant stars, just as there is hope even in the worst despair. The battles of recent months in the Cularin system were costly, claiming thousands of innocent lives. Even so, some remain capable of finding the simple joy of company and conversation amid the constant threat of destruction.

"Ch'hala tea, Mister Haque?"

"Don't mind if I do. Thank you, sir."

"Don't mention it. It's a lovely blend, made from only the finest roots."

"That sounds delicious, Mister Zlash. I wonder, though -- what is the occasion?"

The glass of the transport was slightly tinted and gave the surrounding landscape a golden sheen. Even though the hour was late and the cloud cover kept the moonlight from penetrating, a dim outline of the city below was still visible.

"Well, the world is a better place today, is it?"

"Is it, Mister Zlash?"

"Quite so. The dreadful Jedi killer was dealt with, the Thaereians no longer patrol the skies above, and the grasp of Lord Nirama is no longer at the throats of the people of Cularin. Ah, here is your tea."

"My thanks. But I have to wonder also -- are these not all things that make the system worse, not better?"

Outside, city lights flickered like stars. The people of Hedrett were coming and going, working and going to bed, living their lives and running for them. All this happened far below the golden window, perched high as it was on one of the settlement's tallest buildings.

"How do you mean, Mister Haque?"

"I'm glad you asked. With the Jedi killer gone, the remaining Jedi in the system will begin joining the Clone Wars, yes?"

"Yes, but what is your point, might I ask?"

"You may, Mister Zlash. The Jedi will leave Cularin soon, and when they do, the system will make a tempting target for the Secessionists. In a way, the Jedi killer kept us out of the Clone Wars."

The distant sound of a high-pitched siren echoed into the Spartan office. An oscillating warble, it was the unmistakable wail of an OPS intervention speeder. Somewhere in Hedrett, another tragedy was playing out. Someone, whether it was in a dark alley or a smoke-filled bar room, was breathing their last due to theft, murder, or some other dire scheme. The sound was becoming more common with each passing day.

"You raise an interesting point. But how can the loss of the Thaereians be an issue?"

"Because their presence was a corruption the system had grown to live with. Now, Cularin must defend itself without the Jedi, with only the strength of a militia force already spent from its efforts ousting the aforementioned Navy, Mister Zlash."

"I think I see. You mean to say that the system should not have overthrown the Thaereian Navy to begin with? And would you like cream with that?"

"Not at all. And yes, please, just a touch. The Navy was bleeding Cularin dry. It had to go. I am merely suggesting that the timing was flawed. The Clone Wars . . . complicate things. Having the Thaereians was useful, if only as a shield."

The office building with the golden window was one of the newest constructions in Hedrett, built by a corporation with dreams of grand profits to be had from the forests of Cularin. When the Tarasin, the indigenous people here, had objected to the harvesting of their world, the corporation pulled their support and abandoned the complex. Now, it existed as a high priced condominium, a refuge for those with money and a desire to live apart from the fringer rabble of the streets below.

"Your logic is irritable as always, Mister Haque. However, I must admit I do not see how the loss of Nirama is a bad thing. Unless, of course, you see that as another window of vulnerability."

"Excellent deduction. The damage of his loss is already evident, my insightful associate. With the installment of his replacement, Cularin has already become a more dangerous place."

"Very true. A more expensive place as well. Importing these Devros crystal tea cups was much cheaper under Nirama's reign."

"Tragic, Mr. Zlash, truly tragic."

For those living in the executive suites of the Golden Venture building, life is detached from the cares and concerns of others in the Cularin system. Rich, powerful, or both, these residents rarely interact with others on anything other than a professional level.

"I agree completely. But one must admit this situation does open up some interesting possibilities for us."

"True enough. Speaking of which, the tea is lovely, but we really should be going."

"Well said, Mister Haque. It would not do to keep our employers waiting. Don't forget your throwing razors."

"Thank you, Mister Zlash. Can't very well expect people to kill themselves, now can we?"

Everyone's a Critic

Reactions to a recent story, attributed by some to Cularin Militia Commander Osten Dal'Nay, are mixed. Some view the story as a confirmation of Dal'Nay's duplicitous nature or his lack of honor, while others view it as evidence of his loyalty to Cularin. Conspiracy theories abound -- how much of the story may be based on actual events? Is it a plot to undermine the credibility of the man most directly responsible for the formation of Cularin's militia? Is it anything other than an elaborate hoax?

{{posttime 12:14:33}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid wampa1}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node a11.r9l1}}

Hi everybody. I saw that militia-guy story. I bet u all else saw it 2, since it got posted 2 the big nodes and got lots of people reading it. I just wanted 2 c what everybody else thought because I thought it was pretty good. I never saw the ending coming! How come he had 2 kill the other guy, and how come the other guy tried 2 kill him, and what did the other guy mean when he was talking about not fixing a gun. If u r a soldier, don't u need ur gun 2 work?

I think I liked the story but I'm not sure I got it. Plus I figured we could talk about it because things have been kind of quiet around here lately.

So here's my thoughts: It's a good story. I like Nightwing (cool name!) because he's real serious like me. Nobody can mess with him. Not even commanders. (Especially stupid Tharian commanders!) But he doesn't know how to fix his gun and I think that's not so good if ur supposed 2 be in the navy. Even Thare's navy. Which isn't all that good, right?

ur friend
Wampa1

{{posttime 12:40:23}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid tharestinx}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 0.0.0}}

Utter brilliance. I love this story. It's got everything, but the most important thing it has? Nerf-herders from Thaere (hey, wampa? Learn how to spell; it's "Thaere" and "Thaereian") getting their just rewards. Art imitating life much? Just goes to show that there was always trouble in Thaere, because they didn't know how to take care of their own. No discipline. All big plans and schemes, but no execution. Officers going around and picking on enlisted men for no good reason. You know what I like best? The subtext. You have to really read between the lines to "get" the story, but what it's really about is the imperfect distribution of wealth and power in our society. Like the Senate. The Senate is keeping the rest of us down! How many people actually voted for that Wren woman? I don't know anybody who did, but there she is, sitting in her little floating platform, talking like she talks for all of us. She's not talking for me. Except that she is, because of where I live. But if she was really talking for me, she would have gotten rid of Thaere a long time ago. All I've got to say is -- I told you all so! I told you! I never fell for anything Thaere did, you lobotomized rancors! I always knew Thaere was trouble!

{{posttime 13:00:12}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid alyssaroxu}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 21s.ig8.8}}

Oh. My. It's the dirt magnet, the wampamatic. The wampus maximus. The Dark Lord of the Wamp. Wampa1 has come back to the holonet, to weigh in with an opinion completely unburdened by facts or higher-level cortical activity. Welcome back, Wampa1. Welcome back.

I saw the story, but didn't think much of it. I finished and I was like, meh. What's the point? Guy cleaning his gun gets jumped by his boss and has to kill the boss with the boss's own vibrodagger before dumping him out an airlock. If I had a cred for every time I saw THAT story on the holovids, I'd have more creds than Wampa1 has body lice. {{fileattach: bodylice.mov}}

I just don't see what there is to get excited about. Does it matter if soldier-boy wrote the story or not? It doesn't make it any better or any worse. It pretty much can't make it worse.

Just my thoughts

Alyssa

Future Apprentice to Baylan

{{posttime 13:20:57}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid critsym}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node cre.8gd.rt}}

If I'm being honest, that was terrible. No, beyond terrible. I read it, but my reaction was, "So what?" There was no substance, no style, no sense of characterization. All we had was a word jumble, spliced together with the barest sense of narrative and a level of galaxy-induced angst that you might expect out of a twelve-year-old philosopher. Not a particularly mature twelve-year-old, either.

If the author actually was Commander Dal'Nay, I think we should all be happy that the Commander has a day job. No one should be happier than the Commander himself, on that count. If someone else were the author, I would certainly advise the Commander to take whoever attributed this pile of tripe to him to task for the slanderous allegation.

There is nothing in this story to like. I'm sorry, but the sooner it's out of the public eye, the better.

{{posttime 13:25:25}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid wishtaun}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 3a7.573.ak}}

wow that was harsh; i guess i've got a few questions, and the first one is -- what is 'tripe,' and how come it always comes in piles?

part of me says we shouldn't be worrying about who wrote this; the rest of me more or less agrees; what matters isn't who wrote it, it's what message is

being conveyed, and despite what crit said, there's something important buried in this story

the questions -- why should we want this out of the public eye; people should read whatever they want, right; i don't know a lot about stories, but whatever makes this one so bad, this reader missed; the literary value of the story isn't important to me, just what it says about the guy who's supposed to be protecting cularin; traitor much?

wt

'if wishes were tauntauns, we'd all eat steak'

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{{posttime 13:44:33}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid wampa1}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node a11.r9l1}}
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Alyssa ur mean. I was nice 2 u, even when u were mean 2 me b4. I bet u did like the story and ur just saying u didn't 2 mess with the wampanator (see? I remembered what you called me). It's a good story, and Nightwing is the coolest. Do u have anything to say about the story, or r u just going to make urself look dumb by insulting people who didn't do nothing to u? I DON'T HAVE BODY LICE. I use soap. I'd say something not-nice about u, but I'm 2 good for that.

ur friend
wampa1

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{{posttime 13:51:29}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid critsym}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node n0.tln.thk}}
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I honestly wonder why I bother. Why do I log into this node, when I know I'm going to be bombarded with these horrible, horrible posts? It's as though the entire world has decided that I should be made to suffer. I suppose it's my lot in life.

None of which changes the basic fact that this is a poorly-conceived, badly-executed, puddle of vomitous words that make no sense and tell no meaningful story.

The question you should be asking yourselves is, why would I bother reading something this dreadful? What possible reason could there be for something this inexcusably bad to exist, and to be widely published? If you ask me, there's a deeper motive to the publication of this story, since it certainly has no artistic merit to speak of.

{{posttime 14:14:14}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid alyssaroxu}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node a11.r9l1}}

Wampa, seriously, go away. Learn to spell. Stop using numbers to represent words. That's so Last-Year-in-Corellia. All you've done is bring up a story that everyone had read anyway. Go back to scratching your lice before somebody dunks you in a vat of mynock juice.

Crit makes an interesting point, though. It's really not that good a story. Why is it getting so much play? It makes you think that somebody wants us reading it.

Where's tharestinks, anyway? I've gotta think he has an opinion on this. C'mon, conspiracy guy. Tell us what we're missing!

{{posttime 14:34:19}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid wampa1}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node a11.r9l1}}

Hah! Caught u on my node again! U no what I did, alyssa? I put a virus on ur acct, what do u think of that? Pretty soon u won't even be able to post in ur 'I m such a lamer' node!

What conspiracy?

ur cranky friend
wampa1

{{posttime 15:02:11}}

{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid tharestinx}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 0.0.0}}

Maybe it's just me, but I don't think this seems like the kind of thing Thaere would do. Why would they post a story about some guy named 'Nightwing' killing a Thaereian officer? There are some conspiracies that are too far out, even for me. I think it's a morality tale. You reap what you sow, and all that. Thaereian officer mistreats an enlisted man and gets killed for it. You read too much into it and you start making a mess out of a perfectly good story.

{{posttime 15:51:42}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid ostenmustdie}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node r2n.00m.807}}

How can you all be so dense? This isn't a story. It's a confession! Go back and search the Thaereian archives. You can find this, pretty easy: {{fileattach: kulkisdeath.rpt}} Here's the executive summary: There really WAS a Commander Kulkis, and somebody stabbed him, then dumped his body out an airlock. Nobody knew what happened to him until he floated in front of a YT-1300 and ended up splattered on the cockpit viewing portal. {{fileattach: kulkisextremecloseup.img}} Get this: His body was found two months after Osten Dal'Nay defected to Cularin. He went AWOL, abandoned the people to whom he'd sworn allegiance, killed a commanding officer and dumped him out an airlock, and then came to Cularin. Why? How come nobody ever asked why?

"Loyal to his home. Loves Cularin."

Am I supposed to believe that? He's got something going on. Mark my words.

{{posttime 16:20:23}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid tharestinx}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 0.0.0}}

Wow. I thought I was paranoid.

{{posttime 16:51:19}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}

{{userid ostenmustdie}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node r2n.00m.807}}

It's not paranoia, my friend. Everybody assumed Dal'Nay was one of those vaunted "heroes of Cularin." All he did was betray the people who trained him and then use their training against them. Just like he used Kulkis's knife against him. Now he's leaked this, so that everyone can tell him he's a hero, even though he knows he isn't. We might as well just face facts -- the man in charge of protecting the system is a murderer. Of course, given how long Cularin put up with Nirama, I shouldn't be surprised.

We should ask ourselves whether we really need this man, or what he represents.

{{posttime 17:02:20}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid wishtaun}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 8as.42.ii1}}

wow that was deep; see, that's what i was talking about; if it really was cmdr dalnay that wrote this, cularin's got a problem, and if it wasn't, somebody wants us to think we do; it'd be better for everybody if he just stepped down

wt
'if wishes were tauntauns, we'd all eat steak'

{{posttime 17:53:19}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid alyssaroxu}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 992.jur.e13}}

That's a disturbing idea. Mainly because it's so obviously WRONG. I hate talking politics more than anyone, but this is so dumb, it just begs to be smacked around. It's like calling a Hutt "fatty." You gotta know you're going to end up floating with the other amphibians waiting for a trip down slug-gullet. So let me say this, and I think I speak for a lot of Cularin citizens: Commander Dal'Nay has done right by us. He's protected our homes. He's protected MY home. I don't care what he did before he came here. I don't know who or what he killed, but you know what? He was military. His job description involved KILLING PEOPLE. I don't care if he killed some Thaereian commander, given everything Thaere did to us. I don't care if he just wrote a story because he

wished he HAD killed this Kulkis guy. It doesn't matter. The past is the past. Leave it alone. There's nothing about those last two postings that isn't uberlame.

Now, if you'll pardon me, I've got a couple of nodes to frag, to keep halfwits from belittling a real hero.

Alyssa
Future Apprentice to Baylan

{{posttime 18:00:00}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid culmil1}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node tr8.683.mil}}

This is a courtesy message to inform you that the postings to this topic are being monitored by G. Bresch, Lieutenant, Cularin Militia. The Militia appreciates your continued vigilance.

{{posttime 18:41:19}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid wampa1}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node a11.r9l1}}

Kewl! So, do u know Osten? Tell him Nightwing is the coolest!

Hold on. Somebody at my door!!!

All right. I'll be going now. I hope all of you are doing well. Best wishes for the evening.

Your friend,
Wampa1

{{posttime 18:48:59}}
{{postdate [yesterday]}}
{{userid alyssaroxu}}
{{postloc Cularin holonet node 492.as6.5}}

Um... dirt magnet?

I am SO out of here!

Alyssa

Going into hiding with Baylan

A Mother's Memoirs, Concluded

Twice, Mother Dariana of the Hiironi has allowed researchers to ask her questions to record her thoughts about and experiences in Cularin. She agreed, last week, to what she refers to as "one final session." Those involved in the process expressed concern; their concern elicited only the gentlest of smiles from the ancient Mother. From behind eyes shrouded by wrinkles that decades ago grew their own wrinkles, Dariana let the moment pass. There could be no doubt that their concern touched her, nor could there be any doubt that, at least for the moment, she intended to say nothing further on the topic.

I had told them this would be the last of our talks. Even before I saw the machines with all their flashing lights and their scrolling, blinking numbers, I had told them. Because I remembered. I remembered the sense of the unfamiliar that came with those machines. Wondrous as I find them, remarkable as they are, that they will record for a thousand, thousand years what would have been passed down by my children for generations. And I remembered thinking, more than once, that such perfect recordings could never serve to teach. Not truly. Because what is learned, if the lessons come from so far in the past? When mothers teach daughters the lessons their own mothers taught, the lessons change. The learner has become the master, but the master is not the same person the learner once was. Much has been forgotten. More has been learned than the lesson itself. The galaxy has changed around the learner, and so when the lesson is taught once more -- decades later -- the meaning of the lesson cannot be the same.

These words will ever be the same, though. What I say today, to this box . . .

A gentle tapping noise, then the bumping of a long nail being dragged across the face of the recorder.

What I say to this box will sound the same in a thousand years as it does today. And I wonder whether the things of which I speak will retain any meaning. Will my words bring insight, or confusion?

If you ask my children, they may tell you that this has ever been the question. Do my words bring insight, or do they bring confusion? But there are words, and there are the words beneath them. And the words beneath, they are what matter. I speak, and you hear, and later -- perhaps much later -- my meaning may come clear to you. Or, rather, the meaning you assign to my words becomes clear.

And when I think that, I think perhaps my words may still bring something to the galaxy. Assuming my words survive. Assuming the galaxy survives.

This will be my last time to speak to the flashing, beeping box. Not because I am dying. Because I am comfortable with the box. I am comfortable with speaking to the thing that is not one of my children, can never be one of my children. So I must step back. Step away. I must return to the teaching of those who wish to be taught, those who it is right for me to teach. My children on Cularin must be my priority. The rest of the galaxy -- if I had more years than the stars, I might never teach all of them well enough. But for my children of the jungle, I will always be present.

I should talk about endings. Because this is the end of my use of the recording box, and because many other things are ending. The galaxy will not end -- the galaxy never does, it has neither beginnings nor endings, it simply is -- but much that we know will end.

And no, this is not an old Mother's way of speaking obliquely of her own death. Death has walked the jungle paths with me for years. Sometimes beside me, sometimes behind me, sometimes close enough that I could smell its cold breath. You do not see so many turnings of the suns without knowing death, without moving past your ability to fear it, to see it as anything other than a natural part of how things are.

I will die. We will all die. Whether I die tomorrow or in ten years matters not.

My own mother's passing was slow. Death walked with her for years. Not beside her, not behind her. With her. It held her hand. When she lay down to sleep, death lay beside her. I watched her -- living, still decaying -- and wished to help.

She saw me watching her. Felt me wishing. Waited. Spoke to me in tones one would use with a daughter not yet fully grown, though I was as adult as I felt I needed to be.

Still, when I looked at her, I felt the child she viewed me as. I felt lost. Afraid. I felt the loneliness that would come, when she had gone.

One day, as I sat beside her pallet in the hut she kept at the northern edge of the ch'hala grove, she looked at me and spoke.

"Daughter?" she said.

I don't remember my words. Mine were not the important ones being said.

"Do you grieve?"

I did. There was no hiding my grieving. Grief cuts sharper than stalks of kuvu grass left too long in the light of the suns, and I know my grief bled from every pore. And why not grieve? She was my mother. I expected her to admonish me, to tell me that grieving was wrong. Death is the will of the Force, and all things come to it, and -- well, many of the things I've spoken so far into the box.

She did not say any of these things. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you."

I asked her why she would thank me when we both knew the truth of death. Becoming one with the Force is a completing of who we are.

"Because," she said, and I remember her voice being so tired, so broken, that it seemed to melt away from her, "it is the grieving that lets us remember. It is what makes us alive. Different from the trees. From the kilassin. They are part of the Force. They are tied to the galaxy just as we are. But when a tree falls in the forest, the other trees do not weep. They grow, they stretch their roots into the earth where the fallen tree once drew its nourishment, they eat hungrily at the sunlight and drink thirstily of the water. When a kilassin dies, other kilassin do not grieve."

I later saw a grieving kilassin, but only once, and suspect it was not typical of its kind. But I had not, when my mother was speaking, and would not have interrupted to correct her if I had.

"The other kilassin are more likely to leave their dead to rot -- or, if they are the great toothy ones, devour their dead themselves. But no grieving.

"Our ability to grieve," and her voice hurt her, I could tell, and it hurt me to hear her in pain, "is what ties us most strongly to the Force. It is the wondrous web of life, daughter. We know it for what it is. We do not forget it. We see the life that is part of the Force, and remember that which has already gone to join the Force. Just as you will remember me. Just as others will remember you when you have gone."

There are many lessons I could impart to this strange, blinking box. But the words would be no greater, nor any more true, for my having said them. The lessons I would teach are ones that those who take the time to listen -- to do more than just listen, indeed, who take the time to hear -- do not need to be taught.

Reminded, perhaps. But in the end, we are all one with the Force. All knowledge is at our fingertips. We need only be reminded to reach . . . to grasp . . . and to know.

Letters in the Sand

Nothing about the way they dressed marked them as different from the Sophouse regulars. Their clothes -- loose-fitting, tan shirts and pants that might, weeks ago, have actually had pleats -- rode beneath a layer of dirt, grease, and space dust darkened in places by sweat stains. They sat in a booth in the back, beneath a flashing orange advertisement for "Gorksin Ale: The Year's Best Expansion Export." Their drinks, watery-sweet confections that had been delivered with a burst of flame but that now looked and smelled a little like drainage from the coolant tank of a wrecked speeder, sat untouched between them.

You saw them come in. You saw them -- the tall one and the dark one -- walk to their table, sit down, order, and lean toward one another. The Tarasin music coming from the speakers high in the corners settled to a dim caterwauling. The two men (almost everyone who was there agrees on only two things -- that they were male, and they were probably Human) didn't seem to notice the music, nor did they care when the first of the other patrons joined them.

The conversation remained low, but one by one, the regulars drifted to that back table. The first few walked past, heard something that caught their attention, and stopped to talk; the rest simply followed suit. After all, it wouldn't be Cularin if people weren't nosy.

Despite your better judgment, you took a seat at a nearby table. The rest of the talking in the cantina had died away, leaving the low hum of conversation from the tall one, the dark one, and their audience. They either had something very important to say or something was happening that someone -- maybe you -- would need to stop.

So you sat down, a little more than two meters away, took a sip of your drink, and cocked your head to listen.

"... in the sand." The big one picked up his drink as if he might take a chug, sniffed it, and put it back on the table. "Lots of trouble comes from that direction. Most of what's wrong on the planet. True?"

The dark one nodded.

"That's not the worst of it," the big one continued. His voice was a hungry rumble, low and insistent, like a wave poised to crash. "Nobody knows what's out there. It could be anything. People say you shouldn't be scared, there's Jedi all over the system. But you all saw what happened. That thing that was after the Jedi? They leveled buildings to kill it. They took out city blocks. And do they have the credits to rebuild? No, because all their resources are going to help the war. If we still had all the Masters here that we used to have, that thing would never have gotten so far. It racked up a pretty body count."

Now the dark one raised his hand, balling his fingers into a fist before slowly uncurling them once more. His knuckles crackled like frying mynock. "That is not the problem." He spoke like he had a throat full of gravel. "The Jedi order will always do what the Jedi can do. But watch them. Listen to them. They do not say it, but the Jedi? Afraid. Lanius, he is not so big a fool as to not fear what is happening. All over the galaxy, Jedi are dying. The force for peace, for justice, is being wiped out. Is being sent into battle and not coming back. How many did one droid kill? But the problem is not that Jedi cannot defeat their enemies. All things must end. The Jedi must end, some day. For a thousand generations, they have served the Republic. But the Jedi are not eternal. What happens when they are gone?"

The others at the table murmured words you couldn't hear, but neither the dark one nor the tall one seemed to pay them any mind. They looked at one another, then at the table between them, waiting.

"You always talk doom and gloom," the tall one said, shaking his head. "Yes, the nature of the universe is impermanence. But that doesn't mean impermanence now. Just because this planet" -- he stomped the heavy heel of his boot on the faux-stone floor of the Sophouse -- "will probably be destroyed when Morasil or Termadus explodes, that doesn't mean we should worry about it today."

"Nobody's sending Morasil or Termadus off to fight a foolish war," the dark one grumbled. "The stars are the stars, my friend. They do what they have always done. If we were to pull them out of their orbits or fling a planet or two at them, just because we can, you see how long before they explode. You see. When the universe is not pushed; change comes slowly. When change is forced upon us, we see much more drastic effects. The Jedi are guardians and negotiators, not soldiers. But the order of things has been changed. We are all being asked to do things we've never done before. It's too much, too quickly. The center cannot hold."

The tall one glanced around, his expression almost surprised, as if he were noticing the crowd for the first time. "Assume you're right," he said, his eyes drifting past the dark one. "What do we do about it? What would happen if all the Jedi were to die? It's a ridiculous idea, but if we extend your metaphor -- suns exploding and all that -- isn't that the logical outcome? What does the galaxy lose if that happens?"

"Peace?" The voice came from one of the scruffy, dirty, smelly individuals who'd taken up positions against the nearby wall, nursing mugs of Rodian ale and listening to the conversation. In the cool glow of the orange advertisement flashing unevenly from the wall, they all looked alike, and all had the same dimly fearful, mostly inebriated slackness around their eyes.

"We don't know that, do we?" The tall one stared at the table rather than looking toward the speaker. "We don't. More to the point, we can't."

"Hard to lose something already lost," the dark one said. "If the Jedi keep peace, where does this war come from? We have no peace. It might as well be that we have no Jedi."

The silence that followed his comment stretched like monofilament into the Sophouse dark. It shattered when the tall one spoke.

"Maybe things have moved beyond what the Jedi can handle," he said. "How long have we relied on them? Peacekeepers, negotiators, mystics. The Jedi mean something different to every person. Here on Cularin, they are noble, or they are thugs. Which Jedi have you met this week?"

"They are as stars in the sky," the dark one said. Now he did drink, grimacing as the colloidal goo passed his lips. "Numerous, but ancient. The light they offer was generations old when the first settlers came to Cularin. They burned out long ago, but only now do we see the dark they will leave behind."

The tall one pushed his glass across the table. "My friend sees darkness in every place there's light. Don't listen to him. We ask too much of the Jedi, that's all. We expect them to be more than mortal. That's just not possible. Somewhere, a long time ago, we knew that. Then we forgot. We started believing they were greater than us." He sighed, scratched his cheek.

"Then some of them started believing it. *There is no death, there is the Force.*" He shook his head sadly. "If there is no death, what were those piles of flesh and bone that got scooped into bags and carried out of Hedrett when the droid was done with them? Philosophy only carries them so far. It's good to have something to guide your life. It's good to believe in something. But in the end, the world is what it is. The Jedi are too wrapped up in their mysteries to see that everyone else already knows how their story ends."

He shook a finger at the dark one. "But not *when*. It's inevitable that one day, there will be no more Jedi. But that day isn't today, my friend. Not today."

The dark one swallowed the last of his drink and eyed the glass the tall one had passed him. His face twisted in a scowl. "Today. Tomorrow. Yesterday. Always, you, with the linear universe. Time is not a line. Planets do not move in lines. The universe moves in its great ellipse, and everything that can happen, that will happen, already has happened."

The tall one reached across the table and took his glass back even as the dark one reached for it. "I should know better than to let you drink."

"The Jedi are already gone."

"The Jedi are still on Almas. Some of them are walking the streets here."

"Ghosts. Memories."

"Flesh and blood. But they've forgotten who they're supposed to be, what they're supposed to be doing. If they remembered, they'd be doing something different."

"But they're ghosts."

"They live on Almas. They train on Almas."

"They've forgotten who they are. What legacy will they leave behind?" The dark one leaned forward. "The Jedi don't even train new Padawans. No new Padawans on Almas. With no Padawans to carry on, what will they leave on Almas?"

"An Academy. A library. A museum." The tall one paused. "All right, then. You tell me, what are they going to leave on Almas?"

With a sad sigh, the dark one spread his hands palms up on the table. "Only letters in the sand, my friend. Only letters in the sand." Then his hand closed around the tall one's glass and he drank.

Insider

All sorts of rumors begin on the holonet. Some are benign enough. Others have the potential to make even the most battle-hardened of Cularin's heroes a little nervous, especially when the truth remains hidden behind whispers and innuendo.

<<posttime 02:41:39>>

<<postdate [yesterday]>>

<<userid ins1dr>>

<<postloc Cularin holonet node 1n5.167>>

Sot-sirc is in Cularin.

I had originally thought to end my post with that statement. He is here. At least, I think Sot-sirc is a "he," but he might be "she." No one knows who he is or what he looks like. No one meets him. He shows up somewhere, does "a job," and then is gone. The only evidence that he's ever been in a system is that things have changed. It's almost never for the best.

If he (I'm going to refer to Sot-sirc as a male, if for no other reason than because I give most females I've known too much intellectual credit to be this devious) comes to a system, it's not usually for violent reasons. He's not an assassin -- far from it. Not to say that he can't handle himself in a fight. There's probably a reason nobody alive can identify him, when in a galaxy this big, someone has to have seen his face at some point. But he doesn't broker in death. He brokers in information, and he has a knack for obtaining anything anyone wants. If it can be known, he can find it out.

Nobody knows all the channels he uses. He uses them as well as anyone, though. He has contacts in every corner of the underworld. The Hutts pay him double what they pay any of their local agents without thinking twice. He's gathered data for Jedi Masters and, recently, for the Supreme Chancellor himself.

Or at least, that's how the rumors go. Depending on whom you believe, at any point in time he might be at any three places in the galaxy. And whether or not he's there, things happen. Local governments fall. Politicians and leaders of business take early retirements and move far, far away. One corporation rises to the top while its competitors fall by the wayside, one at a time. Slicers and thrill-seekers and xenoarchaeologists all turn to Sot-sirc when they're in need of better means with which to do their jobs. He has something to offer everyone.

Having him show up anywhere is a sign that something big is about to happen. Things are going to change in unpredictable ways. And, most likely, he'll have something to do with them.

That's all pretty general, though. Here's a story that may help you understand exactly what it means to have Sot-sirc nearby.

Fifteen years ago -- give or take -- someone started querying xenoarchaeological back-channels. If you know where to look, there are all sorts of questions being asked. Questions like, "Where is Darth Bane's crypt?" Or, "Does the lightsaber wielded by Master Bor-Kal Vuluk at the battle of Ruusan still exist?" Or even questions that don't involve Force-users, but let's face it -- that's what everybody wants to know about.

That was the case here, too. Somebody had stumbled across a reference to some artifact or other, some sort of powerful Force-woobie, and wanted to find out where it was. There was a little on it in the Jedi archives, but let's just

say that the person looking for the information was not a Jedi. So getting there was going to take some powerful manipulating of people who aren't so easily manipulated.

It wasn't going to be enough, though. Because for all the Jedi knew about this artifact, they didn't know where it was, and they knew only a little about where it had been or what it had done. There are thousands of such objects, creations with important, indistinct pasts that have been locked away from the galaxy, all but forgotten. Some of them stay that way -- hidden, forgotten. This one didn't.

The trail for this particular object led to Cularin, where it ended. The client made it this far, but no further, and settled in. Searching. Waiting. Searching some more. After several fruitless, frustrating years, he made the queries that brought him in contact with Sot-sirc. That was the first time Sot-sirc came to Cularin.

Within a year, Sot-sirc had completed his research and was gone again, leaving the client to find that which he sought. And he found it.

If you were in Cularin when that object was found, you know it. That was when we stopped being. The artifact is called the "darkstaff." The Jedi don't want us to know about it, but that thing -- it's what took us out of our lives for years. Picked us up and dropped us back down in the middle of a war we never asked for. Sot-sirc helped Len Markus -- that's right, Len Markus, the late Nirama's former associate -- find an artifact of the dark side that could have killed us all.

Now he's back. Sot-sirc has returned to Cularin. And I don't know about the rest of you, but after what happened the last time he visited, I'd just as soon he left again as quickly as possible.

Peace,
Ins1dr

Conspiracy

San Herrera and Nia Reston have a long history of wild theories and incongruous causes. Over the past half-decade, they've continually managed to find ways to keep themselves in the periphery of the public eye. Once or twice a year, something they say or write finds its way into public channels. They've been interviewed by Yara Grugara on multiple occasions and have, in the

opinion of many in Cularin, long since worn out their personal apportionment of fame. From their insistence on helping the "primitive" Tarasin to their crusade for the rights of droids -- or, to use their terminology, "synthetic persons" -- they have consistently come down about as far from the mainstream view on many social issues in Cularin as is possible. No one, however, was quite prepared for this document, posted recently to Cularin's holonet, in which the authors called into question the very armies tasked with defending the Republic.

Are Clone Armies Safe?

By San Herrera and Nia Reston

The past three years have seen bloody fighting waged across our galaxy. The armies of the Separatists, made up almost entirely of synthetic people, have clashed repeatedly with Jedi-led clone armies. On worlds uncounted and out among the stars, the armies have blasted, burned, and mutilated one another, their every action under the control of their creators.

In the past, we have attempted to demonstrate that exercising such control over synthetic people was wrong. We continue to maintain that this is the case, though we understand that many do not agree with our conclusions. It would be difficult to reconcile our arguments, for those who "own" synthetic people. You would naturally deny us, to avoid any uncomfortable tension in your own minds at the realization that you are effectively enslaving sentient beings.

The question of the synthetic person is thus one that we have dealt with and will not return to in this paper other than to draw certain parallels to the current state of the galaxy. These parallels all have to do with the so-called "Grand Army of the Republic," constituted primarily of clones of a reputed bounty hunter (if our sources are accurate, and we believe they are). We will argue that the continued use of such an army, while potentially necessary, is also inherently unsafe. Our arguments will touch on three points.

- First, the mentality of the "original" off whom the clones were based.
- Second, the criticality of free will in determining behavior.
- Third, the essential and inevitable imprecision of the cloning process, and its inability to adequately capture or account for all of the variables that must be controlled in order to "program" an army such as this to

fight in a consistent, coordinated manner. We have a difficult enough time programming droids. If something were to happen to a clone, if it were to begin to manifest aberrant behavior, it's unlikely that a memory wipe would suffice.

As regards our first point, we have come into possession of information stating that the clones that make up the Grand Army of the Republic (GAotR, for future reference) are, in fact, clones of a single individual. While we have not obtained his name, we understand that he was a bounty hunter -- an individual tasked with hunting down and in some cases killing other living beings. There are those who would argue that this is precisely the type of individual best suited to having a clone army created in his image: ruthless, cold, and willing to take lives.

However, the mentality of the bounty hunter is very different from the mentality of a soldier. Bounty hunters are inherently individualistic. They are constantly in competition with other bounty hunters, trying to find and capture or kill the target before anyone else does. They are ill-suited to cooperation, and are notoriously bad at following orders. For all we know, this particular bounty hunter may have been mentally unstable; he wouldn't be the first in his profession to not be playing with a full sabacc deck.

If a clone army to be led by Jedi were to be created, why not clone someone more suited to serving the galaxy? Why not an army of Mace Windu clones? Why utilize an individual with an unpredictable, dangerous temperament? The choice indicates a severe lack of judgment on the part of whoever commissioned the GAotR, since we now find ourselves defended by several thousand (likely imperfect, due to the nature of the technology) copies of what most of us would consider an individual of questionable moral fiber. The choice also indicates the possibility that the army may have been constructed with some secondary purpose in mind. If you have access to Jedi, why would you avoid using Jedi as the foundation for your army? Perhaps because Jedi are too likely to disregard morally ambiguous directives. Regardless, the choice of foundation for the clone armies is the first factor that leads us to doubt their safety and reliability.

Second, we will draw parallels between the two armies fighting this war, the clones and the synthetic people. Specifically, some would argue that the terminology we have chosen for what most would call "droids" could apply equally well to the clones themselves. We find it hard to disagree with this

assessment. Whether an individual is created on an assembly line or grown in a tank, that person is not completely "natural." However, being tied to the Force (as all sentient things are, depending on your point of view) keeps both synthetic people and clones from being "unnatural," leaving us in the awkward position of trying to explain how they fit into the gestalt of the galaxy.

It is our opinion that neither the armies of the Republic nor those of the Separatists "fit" particularly well. They were created to serve, and by design, to minimize their free will. This cannot, however, be accomplished perfectly in either case. When we ask another creature -- carbon-based or not -- to make decisions, that creature must exercise free will. Synthetic people are given tasks that require nonlinear thinking and problem solving capabilities. Clones are asked not only to solve problems, but also to make rapid and precise decisions about how to approach complex tactical situations. There must be free will to make decisions in both cases, and if free will is present, it is always possible for those who are being used -- which we contend is the case for both classes of synthetic people -- to revolt.

Droids can be fitted with restraining bolts. Does such technology exist for inhibiting the behavior of living creatures? If so, we've never heard of it, and we'd be very frightened to learn that the GAotR is actually subject to that type or level of control. If we assume that they are not, then what happens when this army -- fully armed and trained, with the resources of the Republic behind it -- decides that enough is enough, that they are going to exercise their free will and take control of the Republic they have "saved"? This cannot be safe. The Jedi are too few (and growing fewer) to maintain control over this army if things should go bad. The clones are unsafe.

Third, and perhaps most critical, is our insufficient understanding of the cloning process and our inability to precisely "program" clones to do as they are told. While the authors do not know all the details of how the clones were "grown," we are confident that in order to turn them into soldiers, they were subjected to rigorous behavior modification to ensure that when the time came, they would follow orders. However, as has already been noted, we frequently have difficulty programming synthetic people to do exactly what they were built to do. The question of free will again arises, forcing us to consider how thoroughly the obedience of these clones can be guaranteed.

The necessary answer is, their obedience cannot possibly be guaranteed. As long as they have any degree of free will, as long as they are living beings, as

long as they are *armed*, there is always the possibility of revolt. One need only look so far as the various droids that have "gone rogue" over the years to see that no amount of programming can prevent malfunctions. We have a much more thorough understanding of the circuits and gears that make up a droid than we do of the cells that make up a "living" creature, and that understanding translates into greater control. Now, we have the GAotR, vested with all the power of the Republic, given all the weaponry necessary to eradicate our enemies, and we place blind faith in the notion that they will never turn on their creators? This is both naïve and foolish.

We are convinced that the clones that comprise the Grand Army of the Republic are unsafe. They were created from a flawed template, they continue to possess free will, and no amount of behavioral "programming" can possibly make them even as safe or predictable as an R2 unit. Putting our faith in the future of the galaxy on these shoulders, however strong they may be, is a mistake. We must ask ourselves, given these factors: Why were clones chosen? Why not draw on local system militias, pulling them together and organizing them beneath the eyes of the Jedi? Finally, we must ask this question: What is to become of the clones, when the war is done? The Republic has not had a standing army for generations, but what other purpose do these individuals know? There are too many unanswered questions, too many things that hint at an ulterior motive. For all our sakes, we very much hope we are wrong.

We will not reproduce the various comments that followed the posting of this essay to the holonet, in order to not offend our readers' sensibilities.

Banner Days

It took some doing, but Dyrila and Taan managed to push their way to the front of the crowd. The barrier at the edge of the street kept them from going any further, but that was all right; at least now they could see the parade. Something like this had never happened before in their young lives and, if what their father had said was correct, it would hopefully never have to happen again.

Dyrla pointed to the back end of a speeder disappearing slowly from sight. "Do you think that was Osten? Do you?" Her voice was even higher pitched than normal, making it so shrill that even her brother had a hard time standing it.

"Calm down, will you? So what if it was? Dad says he didn't do any of the real fighting. I'm here to see Joker Squadron."

That earned him a punch to the arm. "What? Osten's only like the Grand General Lord of the Army or something. That makes him super important." She stuck her tongue out at Taan. "Way more special than your Joker people."

Taan knew he couldn't hit her back. The last time he'd done that, he's gotten grounded for a week and missed the Sien'Soro concert he'd wanted to go too so badly. No punch was worth that, even one the little wretch deserved. "Bah! Dad says people like Dal'Ney just sit on their butts and get glorified while the real heroes fight and die."

"Don't say that word!" Dyrla's little hands started to tremble and for a moment, Taan thought he was going to get hit again. Then he realized what he'd said and what his sister was about to do, which was cry.

"Oh, sis; I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I meant they fight and -- sleep. Right, they sleep out there in space on their ships, while generals and such get nice comfy beds and don't have to do any work at all."

It was feeble and he knew it, but it seemed to work. Dyrla was very sensitive about death. Even the suggestion of it was usually enough to send her right over the edge, and that was the last thing he wanted. Sure, she was a brat, but she was still his sister. Ever since their mother's transport had been shot down by the Thaereians, she and Dad were all he had left.

Another speeder came into view, this one with several people he didn't recognize. "Hey, Dyr, who do you think they are?" he asked, hoping to distract her.

"Ummm . . . let me look." Dyrla had insisted on buying one of the parade program chips from a street vendor before they had plunged into the crowd to get here. He'd thought it a waste at the time, but now Taan was actually glad the little blonde moppet was impossible to argue with. A few button presses later, Dyrla showed him the screen of her hand computer. "See?"

The images matched the faces of the people on the speeder, though the screen showed them in military uniforms. "Oh, that's Beta Company. I heard they actually went down on Thaere itself and fought for liberation. Wow."

Dyrla nodded in admiration as she watched the speeder creep by, but then a look of confusion crossed her young face. "I don't get it."

Her brother leaned close and stole a drink from her slurp pouch. "Don't get what?"

She punched him again but giggled while she did it. "Hey, that's mine! And I don't understand something. The chip says there were twelve people in Beta, right? So how come there are only five people in the speeder?"

Taan thought fast, but his mind was a blank. He knew she'd go off if he told her the truth. If she thought people had actually died, as so many had fighting for Cularin against the Thaereians, his sister would just break down. He could almost hear her wailing now. He had to think of something quick.

The man they were standing in front of crouched down and smiled. "They've already gone by, little one. The speeders are way too small for all of them at once."

Taan breathed a sigh of relief as Dyrla nodded and accepted the white lie. She wrinkled her nose at the brown-haired Human, though. "Thanks, but I'm not little. My daddy says I am way tall for my age, and that I'm gonna be as way high up as a Wookiee when I grow up!" In truth, Dyrla was very short and very, very defensive about it.

The man held up both hands in a surrender fashion. "I stand corrected, miss giant." His smile and apology seemed to settle Dyrla and, in her infinite benevolence, she forgave him with another giggle.

Just then, the clouds overhead broke, and several starfighters came screaming into view. Each one was trailing a colored plume of smoke and weaving around each other to make a spiral of rainbow over the crowd. They descended enough for the parade-goers to see their paint jobs. Each one had their usual squadron markings and now bore the official seal of Cularin on their underside.

"What's that big splotch mean?" Dyrla was clearly unimpressed by the fighters, though her brother was watching them in awe. Someday, he wanted to be a

pilot in the Militia and marry Major Starbolt, a woman he'd seen once on a poster and fallen instantly in love with -- as only twelve-year-old boys can do.

"That," said the crouching man, "is the symbol of Cularin, and it means that every survi -- I mean, every serviceable member of the militia has been given a charter in the new Cularin military." He could obviously tell that his words mean nothing to the little girl. "It's a mark of honor and it means they're all real military officers now."

Still nothing. Then her face lit up. "Oh, it means they're special?"

The man nodded. "Exactly! Since they're the ones who actually went out and fought, they're being rewarded with medals that say they're special."

Taan smiled as well. "That's only fair. I hope people like Dal'Ney don't get any medals or anything. They didn't do anything, so my Dad says." He was adamant about that, even though he had no real idea what he was talking about. His father had become bitter and angry since his mother died running the Navy's blockade, but he was still Taan's father. Whatever he said was still law.

The man nodded in total agreement. "Want to know the truth? I hope they don't, either." He stood up, flagged down a refreshments cart, and bought them all new pouches and kilo-dogs to eat. "My treat."

As the food arrived hot and fresh, there was a disturbance in the crowd across the way. Up against the barriers on the far side of the road, three people dressed in militia uniforms held up signs saying, "Dal'Ney for Senator!", "Death to Thaere!" and "Martial Law Now!" The men were quickly pulled back into the crowd by security, though it took a little while where the Trandoshan was concerned.

Behind Taan and Dyrila, the man just groaned and shook his head. Dyrila looked up at him and asked, "What's Martial Law?"

"A very bad thing," was his only answer. Then, with a smile that Taan could tell was somewhat forced, he apologized to them and disappeared into the throng of people. "I have to go now; sorry. Enjoy the rest of the parade!"

Taan munched on his kilo-dog for a while, watching speeders go by and asking his sister to identify the people in them. Each time, her wizard fingers brought them up long before the speeders got to them. She was only seven, but she

was already really good with her hand computer. Though Taan would never admit it in a zillion years, he was actually kind of proud of her.

When the last speeder came past and the fanfare reached its highest pitch ever, he didn't need his sister to tell him who its occupant was. His sister tugged on his sleeve, but he knew what she was going to say. They both just stared as the brown-haired man rode past, uncomfortably wearing a brand new General's uniform and waving to the crowd.

Conversations With Lanius

In the past, Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk of the Almas Academy has consented to a number of interviews with Cularin's media. These interviews have ranged from the bizarre to the pedagogical, with much of the tone set by the individual doing the interviewing. Master Lanius himself always remains the picture of composure, the serious-but-kind educator who takes the lives of his pupils, and the rest of the galaxy, very seriously indeed.

The individual sitting across his desk from him this time is the same one who's conducted the last two interviews with him -- Cularin's own Yara Grugara. Yara's coverage of the Thaereian conflict, as well as her ongoing editorials about the overall war effort, have begun to win her recognition throughout the galaxy. There are even rumors that a news syndicate on Coruscant recently made overtures to the former host of "Eye on Cularin," though thus far, no announcements have been made.

The situation in Cularin, and in the galaxy at large, is very different than the last time these two spoke. There is another important difference with this meeting, though. As the holorecorders begin to whirl, Yara checks her datapad, takes a deep breath, and speaks.

Yara: Friends, this is Yara Grugara. I'm in the office of Jedi Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk on Almas. Master Lanius, thank you for inviting me here today.

Lanius (nods): You're very welcome.

Yara: I must say, this came as something of a surprise. Usually, I have to contact Cularin's VIPs. But this time, you contacted my service directly. Would I be correct in concluding that you have some things you specifically want to talk about? And would you be willing to answer a few other questions when you're done with your own issues?

Lanius smiles. It's a tired smile, punctuated by the dark half-moons that hang beneath his eyes. He rests his chin on the tips of his fingers and nods.

Lanius: Yes. And yes. Although I suppose any prefatory remarks you'd like to make would be appropriate. It is your show, after all.

Yara: Prefatory? It's hard to know where to start, with everything that's gone on. It's been an eventful year. We could talk about Thaere, we could talk about Nirama, we could talk about local political maneuvering or the Believers or just about anything. But our viewers have kept up on all of these issues, so I suppose what I'd like to start with -- if it's all right with you -- is just this: What's on your mind?

Lanius nods once more, then leans back and weaves his fingers together before resting them on his chest.

Lanius: All of that. All of it and more. I suppose that what I really want to do is reassure the people of Cularin that the Jedi are not going to abandon them. And to say that we are truly sorry for any losses sustained as a result of the droid that was sent here to hunt us down. We dealt with the problem as expediently as we could, and we are grateful to the Cularin Militia for their vital role in resolving the situation. Without individuals like Major Starmine, it is unlikely that even the most capable of our Jedi could have succeeded.

Yara: We hear a lot about "heroes of Cularin." We've got a lot, don't we?

Lanius: We really do. It would have been very easy for the people of Cularin to fall into the trap that seems to have plagued so much of the galaxy. But they didn't.

Yara (clearly confused): Trap? What trap?

Lanius sighs.

Lanius: There may not be a diplomatic way to say this. In fact, there probably isn't. So I suppose just saying it will have to be enough. The trap is expecting too much of the Jedi. We love and protect the galaxy, but we are few, and the galaxy large. I've traveled -- in my youth, I traveled quite a bit -- and I've seen worlds where when anything went wrong, the citizens contacted Coruscant and requested a Jedi presence. I've never seen that in Cularin. People -- accountants, librarians, mechanics, pilots -- have been willing to step up when danger has arisen. They haven't waited for anyone else to take care of their problems. They've taken care of it themselves. Which is good. It gives me hope.

Yara: Could you elaborate? That makes it sound like you might lack hope, if people hadn't been willing to do what needed to be done. Would it be so bad, for us to count on the Jedi?

Lanius: Bad? It might be. People need to count on themselves. If someone else is fighting your battles for you, protecting you, what happens if one day you look around and they aren't there?

Now it's Yara's turn to frown. She checks her datapad.

Yara: Does this have something to do with the clone armies and that questionable bit of opinion that was posted to the holonet recently?

Lanius (confused): I'm sorry? I don't read most of the public areas that much. If it's not from one of the major news organizations, I may not have heard it. Busy, you know.

Yara: I'm just trying to understand what you mean. About protecting ourselves. Is this a Force thing? Do you know something the rest of us don't?

Lanius: Nothing relevant, I'm sure. I don't know what the future holds. I used to think I did, but for all of us, the future is clouded.

Yara: You sound so "Jedi" when you say that!

She then realizes what came out of her mouth and blushes a deep red. Lanius cocks an eyebrow.

Lanius: Well, there's a reason . . .

Yara (unnecessarily straightening her hair): So, back on task. You're proud of the people of Cularin.

Lanius: Not that it should matter to them, but yes. I am. There are star systems throughout the galaxy where this war has been fought, where the locals have done everything they could to stay out of the way. The people of Cularin have been just as willing to fight for what they believe as the Wookiees of Kashyyyk, and more willing than dozens of other systems I could name. This Academy has prospered because of the people of Cularin -- not the reverse.

Yara: But things should be calming down now, at least. It seems like our war -- what has locally become known as the "Thaereian Conflict" -- seems to be nearing resolution. There's only so long the rest of the galaxy can remain at war, right?

Lanius: That's not something I can answer. I know that it seems things may be settling back to something approaching "normal." But when was anything ever "normal" in Cularin? We're an exceptional location, in an exceptional time. A Sith fortress, a Jedi academy, wars among smugglers, at least two different groups venerating the dark side of the Force, and your standard array of criminals and malcontents, to say nothing of the economic threats posed by those who would exploit our natural resources. There is no time for complacency. Heroes don't retire, they . . .

He looks away.

Yara: Die?

He looks back at her.

Lanius: That isn't what I was going to say.

Yara: They do, though. That's what makes a hero -- the glorious sacrifice. Right?

Lanius leans forward. His eyes have the look of a man who's thought a lot about the question before him -- maybe too much.

Lanius (beginning lecture mode): Being a hero isn't about how you die. It's about how you live. We have a lot of heroes in Cularin -- most of them, thankfully, still living. Being alive doesn't make their actions any less heroic.

And having an end in sight for our local conflict doesn't remove the onus of protecting our homes from any of us. Heroism doesn't end just because no one is trying to blow up your planet.

Yara: Who's trying to blow up a planet?

Lanius (a little shaken): I'm not sure where that came from. Nobody's trying to blow up a planet -- not that I'm aware of. It was just an example. Probably ill-chosen. Whether someone is trying to blow up a ship, a city, or a planet, it doesn't matter. There have always been threats. There will always be threats. Some will be more mundane than others, but in the end, every action must be taken with the greater good in mind. Every action. The people of Cularin cannot grow complacent; there are too many threats still at large.

Yara (frowning): Are you sure you don't know something the rest of us need to know?

Lanius (with a sad smile): I wouldn't have chosen the path of an educator if I didn't believe that. But now is not the time for that particular lesson. I suppose we can continue to whatever questions you'd like to ask me. I've said what I needed to say.

From there, the interview continued; the full transcript is available at various locations around Cularin's holonet.

Dark Heart

There is no escaping it -- war is a terrible thing. Behind the glamour of parades and the order of military formations lies the reality that when battle is joined, the only truth is kill or be killed. While the majority of the Clone Wars has been fought against a mechanical enemy that can't really "die," the clone troopers who fight them are very real and end up very dead each time the Republic and the Separatists clash. The Separatists aren't limited to their metal monstrosities, however. Some of their soldiers are quite alive and, in many cases, that life only serves to make them deadlier . . .

He hadn't intended it, but his near-panicked run through the jungle had brought him right back to the crash site. She wouldn't be fooled by his retracing his steps for long; she was too canny for that. Jeht took a moment to lean heavily against the wreckage of his fighter, its black metal serving to keep him upright when his muscles were almost too weak to do the job themselves.

The mist was his ally right now. It made everything indistinct and hard to see, but it masked him just as well as it concealed her. And with his lightsaber off, he wasn't making the same sharp hissing noises that she was. She didn't seem concerned with stealth; she was stalking him like a tiger, and every time she struck, it was with full, terrible warning. With her ferocity and skill, the cunning huntress didn't truly need stealth. That made her all the more fearsome.

Darrus took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and reached out with the Force. He couldn't see her coming, but if he could become truly calm, truly centered, perhaps he could sense her approach. Useful in theory, this had been less than effective so far; the woman seemed extremely skilled at cloaking herself from his farsight.

It wasn't the Force that warned him to lunge forward and roll out of the way; it was the snap-hiss of twin lightsabers erupting through the metal at his back. The hull of his shattered starfighter was just thick enough to afford him the split second he needed to evade the pair of crimson blades as they surged through the plating and cut a swath that would have been the death of him had he not moved.

The woman emerged from within his fighter where she'd been lurking. A cruel sneer graced her black lips as she raised her pair of curved lightsabers in a mocking salute. "Are you tired of running yet?"

Jeht stood to face her, igniting his saber in a wash of violet light and sizzling steam. Then he shook his head, "No, I'm not," and sent a wave of Force energy into the muddy ground between them. There was a snarl of rage from the woman as hundreds of pounds of muck and soil flowed over her -- an impromptu grave for someone who already looked gray and cadaverous.

He knew it would only buy him a few moments, but those were all he needed to sprint away as fast as the Force would take him. He'd managed to drop a transponder buoy before crashing on this forsaken planet and, if he could just reach it, that's where his troops would attempt a rescue. He could track the buoy on his armor's wrist comp, but he had to get to it. That was proving

difficult with the woman who shot him down in the first place dogging his every step.

For more than a minute, he ran with the Force speeding his pace. This was exhausting to be sure, but drained was better than dead at the hands of an opponent he didn't think he could beat. She was so quick, so deadly. The brief duel they'd fought when he first emerged from his crippled ship had shown him that -- and given him a burning chest slash to remember it by. He needed proper medical attention and soon.

Suddenly, his instincts screamed at him to stop, and he obeyed without hesitation. No more than a meter in front of him, a massive tree came toppling down, smashing into the bog with a sickening thud. Then, from its severed stump, a figure leaped out of the mist and onto the tree's trunk, facing him.

"Swamp? A mighty Jedi Knight is reduced to slinging swamp at me like a child? How pathetic. No wonder so many of you have fallen."

That taunt snapped something inside Jeht. He'd been trying to avoid conflict, act like a proper Knight, but the woman's leering grin drove home another truth. Many of them had fallen; too many to be counted. And most at the hands of killers like her.

His eyes blazed as he growled at her, his own hunter's snarl to match her own. The tree she was on tore free from the ground and hurtled into the air. She leaped free and bore down on him, expecting a similar response from Jeht, but she was completely blindsided when the huge trunk stopped and pivoted in midair without the slightest pause in momentum. It caught her full in the body, sending her sailing with a curse of pain and rage sideways into the misty mire.

Darrus was caught for a moment between the desire to hunt her down and the knowledge that he needed to get to the rendezvous point before his men landed and exposed themselves to counterattack. He was riding high on something deeply primal, but he was able to push it aside and do the responsible thing. He spared a last look the direction in which his assailant had been sent flying, and then began running again.

A few minutes later, he found the beacon -- luckily, before the rescue ship had arrived. He approached the beacon, knelt beside it, and meditated both to recover his strength and to pass the tense moments until his troops could land. He could feel that they were on their way; it wouldn't be long now.

Again, his instincts flared and again he obeyed, falling prone as a scarlet arc of light tore through the air where his head had been. She'd somehow gotten close enough to strike without being sensed and waited until the last moment to ignite her lightsaber. That was disheartening; she was learning. Jeht rolled clear of her riposte and leaped to his feet with his saber raised...

...a moment too late. With a lunge so blindingly fast that his eyes never tracked it, the Dark Jedi thrust her other lightsaber forward against his side and ignited the blade, impaling him. Jeht felt the shock of a hole drilled straight through his ribs and lung, felt the burning pain of instant cauterization.

His mind reacted in a flash and sent her hurtling away with an invisible fist of the Force. It smashed the air from her, sent the mud still caking her body flying in all directions, and pulled the blade straight back out of his chest. He wanted to drop to his knees, wanted to give in to the dizzying black that was filling his vision, but as he saw her stagger to her feet across the clearing, something else took hold.

There was no way he was going to let her win. There was no way he was going to become another victim. If she wanted battle, he'd give her one. If she wanted pain, he'd make her scream with it. If she wanted death, he'd force hers down her pale gray throat and make her choke on it.

The pain in his side vanished in that instant, and he rose to his feet but was not standing. Instead, he hovered nearly a meter over the ground, the mist around him whirling in a torrential cascade of shrieking winds and arcs of bright lightning. All he could see was the woman's face, all he could feel was her hated heartbeat, and all he could think about was tearing her limb from black-leather-clad limb.

Reaching out with the storm, his own howl of rage lending thunder to the tempest, he sent the full might of his fury crashing down over her. She screamed and turned to run as the maelstrom struck, coursing through her body with electric arcs of agony. Her lightsabers fell, lifeless, from her spasming hands as she flew backward and was pinned to a tree at the edge of the clearing. Buffeted by gale-force winds and racked by lightning, she could only writhe under the onslaught.

Jeht felt power unlike any he'd ever known. His wound was forgotten, his pain a dim memory. She would die; she would pay for all the lives she took. This was justice. This was righteousness. This was holy wrath, and he was its

powerful instrument. He laughed at the sight of her twitching under the torment of his spiraling storm of retribution.

And then he couldn't see her as a huge metal ship landed between him and his victim. The connection broken, it was as if the strings holding him aloft had been cut. The whirlwind abated instantly, and he fell to the earth below. With a sudden gasp of pain, Jeht's mind cleared enough to realize what he'd done, what he'd unleashed. When his men finally rushed out of the gunship and hauled him aboard, his night-black eyes were weeping.

Some distance away, rasping for breath and barely able to move, the Dark Jedi huntress watched the Republic transport lift off into the air and rise up into the clouds. Every muscle ached, every bone felt broken, but she had a duty to fulfill. With one trembling hand, she pushed a button on her wrist and a hologram of a stately older man appeared in the air before her.

"It is done, my master."

The man's transparent face, difficult to make out clearly in the bright blue of the hologram, was obviously pleased. "And he survived?"

"I pulled my strike. He --" She nearly passed out from pain, but she locked down her will and forced herself to remain conscious. "He will live, though he'll remember this day for a long time to come."

"That was the point of this exercise. Our lord will be pleased. You have done well." The man seemed to consider for a moment, then nodded to himself. "I will reward you with one day to recover. Then you are to move on to your primary target. Understood?"

With a grimace of a smile, the woman nodded. "Thank you, master. It shall be as you command." And with that, she ended the transmission, crawled to her concealed fighter, and slipped away into the night.

Stone and Steel

When the lights are off, rats tend to scurry out from where they've been hiding. While the light of Lord Nirama's gaze was firmly fixed on the underworld of the Cularin system, there were many rats trapped in the few shadowy places left to

them under his regime. Now that Nirama is gone, replaced by a far less discriminating criminal overlord, the system's vermin are free to come out of hiding once again. As the heroes of Cularin are about to learn, even the dark cloud of increased lawlessness may have a silver lining.

"Krael, I don't like it down here."

There was a loud snort from up ahead, followed by three light coughs. Cigarillos had always been Krael's biggest vice; his body was finally starting to show the signs of his two-tin-a-day habit.

"I don't like it either, Vreego, but if half of what the note said was true, we can't miss this. Just think of the profits."

Vreego, a Rodian with a distinct dislike of anything unclean, looked around at the sewage tunnel they were walking through. The worst part of Hedrett's daily outflow was drifting past along a channel of brackish water. "I'm thinking more of the diseases we are liable to catch. Can we please turn back?" His snout, covered in a breather mask and cowl, still turned upward at the imagined stench of the place. "We are lost, anyway."

Krael's face, so piggish the Human could have passed for a Caarite or Ugnaught with a bit of makeup, grimaced. "We ain't lost, and we ain't gonna catch nothing."

The Rodian sighed. "Well, we certainly seem immune to language skills, at any rate."

"You making fun of me?"

Vreego had long since learned not to taunt his business partners too much. Ilb Toranda, that wily Twi'lek snake, had managed to find an excuse not to come, but even his temper would flare at the merest sign of disrespect. Krael, on the other hand, occasionally flew off the handle at imagined slights. Actually insulting him was probably a recipe for disaster -- one to be avoided at all costs.

"No, no. I was just saying that I don't think we paid close enough attention to the directions in the note. That's all." It was a lie, but it seemed to work.

"Oh. Well, this ain't even a problem. I know exactly where I'm going."

Twenty seconds later, they arrived at a caved-in section of the sewers.

Vreego sighed again and pointed at the massive pile of stone, industrial asphalt, and reinforcing steel. "Let me guess, Krael; this is a clever hologram or secret passage of some kind?"

The Human looked at the blockage for a moment and shook his head. "Oh, I forgot. This part of the sewers got trashed when that Jedi Killer thing was whacked. Apparently some Militia guy slammed him through the street right here." Krael gestured to the rubble. "Guess we'll have to go topside for the rest of the trip."

Vreego watched his partner as the large man found the nearest ladder and began ascending. "Wait a minute. Topside, as in on the street?"

Krael, still climbing, nodded. "Yeah."

The Rodian clenched both hands, using all his willpower not to grab the handles of his blasters. "So the swap isn't down here in the sewers at all? We could have gone the whole way up on the surface?"

Krael reached the sewer grate above his head and started unlocking it. "Ummmm . . . sure. I guess."

Vreego couldn't help but rest his hands on his guns. "Then why in the name of the Great Hunter have we been wandering around down here for hours?"

Krael popped the lock and looked down at his green associate. "'Cause it's fun?"

* * * * *

An hour later, Vreego was staring at the largest collection of illegal weapons and armaments he'd ever seen in his life, and that included his time back on Rodia as a starport customs guard. His eyes widened, a terrifying expression on the face of a Rodian, as he looked over a sales booth filled with some of the finest Merr-Sonn handguns ever to come out of the Rimworld colonies.

He wasn't really here to browse, but his meeting with the smugglers behind this fencing event could wait a bit longer. He had some free time, and he'd

been disappointed ever since the government's estate sale on Merr-Sonn guns had come to an end.

An attractive Human woman in a sharply cut business suit of black and maroon walked over from one corner of the booth and smiled coolly. "Can I help you find something, sir?" she asked in a passable attempt at his language.

Vreego shook his head. "I want them all, actually. I collect good guns, and yours are the best. I had a chance to buy some pieces a few months ago, but I got busy and the sale ended before I could act." He lifted and dropped his shoulders, trying to mimic the Human reaction of a shrug.

The woman shook her head and spat a Corellian curse. "That sale was off our backs, you know. Those guns were on order from Merr-Sonn and already paid for. My company took an utter bath on that deal. Almost broke us."

Vreego only wanted to see the merchandise. He had no desire to upset the woman, especially since he didn't know her and wouldn't be able to enjoy the emotional display properly. "Calm, miss. I did not mean to offend you. Could I just take a look at your blaster and projectile rifles?"

Suddenly, a beep on his chronometer reminded him how much time he had left, which was very little.

"Ah, maybe later," he said. "I have a meeting to attend in a few minutes."

The woman's face took on an unreadable expression, and in a low voice that was difficult to make out, she asked, "Are you V?"

The Rodian paused for a moment and then nodded. "I am. You are K?"

With a returned nod, the woman gestured him deeper into the shop and away from other customers. "Correct. The meeting has been postponed until tomorrow. Your agency can keep its retainer and, if you like, you can come back tomorrow at the same time."

As Vreego started to give her an answer, his com link buzzed angrily. Excusing himself for a moment, the Rodian walked to a corner of the booth and brought the link near one of his antennae. "Yes?" He tried not to sound annoyed, but it had been a fairly rough day so far.

"Vree, my good friend, I expected a call by now. You aren't ten cards into a sabacc game already, are you?" It was Ilb, and his Twi'lek condescension was in full force.

Biting back anything more vitriolic, Vreego answered, "No, but I was delayed in getting to the market. Everything is as we expected and better than we feared. There's a little bit of everything here. I think you will be pleased." He paused long enough to decide how to phrase the next part. "But there will be no meeting today. Meeting tomorrow, they say now. Unavoidable delay, apparently. What do you think I should tell them?"

The Twi'lek chortled. "Tell them you'll be back tomorrow, and try to get me a discount on a six rack of glop grenades. That hunting trip last cycle wiped me out."

Vree sighed to himself; that could have gone worse. "As you wish, Ilb. I'll see what I can do. Good --"

Before he could cut off communication, Ilb spoke again. "One quick thing, Vree. I tried to call Krael first, but he's not answering his com. Is there something wrong with his equipment?"

No getting out of it now, he thought with a groan. "Actually, I felt the need to terminate our contract with him. He was not a good investment, sir, and I believe he would have walked us through a lot of offal before he was done."

Ilb laughed, but more because that was his way than any real chance that he caught the joke. "Oh, well, he was an annoying piece of vermin, wasn't he? No matter. This planet has lots more to choose from. Very well, pick us up some grenades, a new carbine, and a new gunman on your way back. All right?"

Vreego agreed and closed down the link. He loved shopping, but he hated doing it for other people, especially on a planet where slavery was illegal. Still, he knew where he could get dependable thugs on short notice in Hedrett, so the day wasn't a total loss.

All Comers

They're not quite heroes, but they try. There can be no doubt that San Herrera and Nia Reston have Cularin's best interests at heart -- or at least, what they *believe* to be Cularin's best interests. But for all their helpful spirit, for all their initiative, it often seems that they're just a bit "off." Earlier this week, San and Nia organized a rally at the base of Reidi Artom's statue on Cularin. What seemed to be an innocent affair quickly turned into an opportunity for speechifying that struck many as unnecessarily divisive. Even San and Nia seemed somewhat unnerved by the course of events. What follows is a transcription of a portion of the event, as recorded and broadcast on Cularin Central Broadcasting.

A crowd of people mill beneath the statue of Reidi Artom that overlooks one of Cularin's two primary cities. A small platform has been erected, a hasty construction that seems to be all loose boards and half-hammered nails. Two young Humans -- a caption reads "San Herrera and Nia Reston" -- seem to be struggling to set up a sound system. They have a pair of wireless microphones, but neither seems to be working. A Rodian from the crowd wanders to the edge of the stage, takes one of the microphones, and slams it against one of the loose boards. The microphone shrieks and whines to life, and the Rodian hands it to San before stepping back into the crowd.

San Herrera: People of Cularin! We come before you today to reaffirm our shared belief that Cularin cannot and will not be subjected to the will of anyone! Cularin is strong! We can and will take on all comers, and we will emerge victorious!

Shots of faces in the crowd. Whatever the citizens of Gadrin thought they were coming here for, this clearly wasn't it. Their faces show surprise, but as they process San's words, there is also pride. A few of them send up a ragged cheer, which gains in strength even as it begins to fade.

Nia Reston: Look at everything we've done -- everything *you* have done! Look at what we've defeated, together! We never had to count on anyone but ourselves, and we're still here! We're still alive! All comers!

Now the cheering is less ragged. Shapes begin to appear in nearby doorways, people making their way out into the streets. Reidi Artom towers above the two young Humans, keeping her opinions (as always) very much to herself.

San: You kept Cularin safe and whole. *You* did! Did the Republic ever send clone armies here? No! Because Cularin didn't need them. We were able to take care of ourselves!

Voice from the Crowd: The Jedi helped!

Other Voice: Weren't there Republic ships for that last battle?

San and Nia don't seem to hear the latter comment. They look to be getting fired up.

San: Sure, the Jedi helped. So did the droids! So did the Tarasin! So did every other sentient being that lives in Cularin. We've survived things no one else has, things no one else could!

Nia: Every day is a different trial, Cularin. And we've survived them all! We don't need to worry about the armies of the Separatists. If they wanted us, they would have come, and you know what we would have done?

Voice from the Crowd (probably not the same): Killed 'em! Death to the Separatists!

Other voices echo the call. Nia looks at San, who shrugs.

Nia: We would have sent them away, just like we sent away everyone else who wanted to hurt Cularin! Who needs Thaere? Who needs the Cartel?

Voice from the Crowd: Aren't they still here?

Other Voice from the Crowd: Death to the piggies!

Nia: We don't have to kill them -- we can just send them away! Cularin can be completely self-sufficient. So what if the Senate didn't want to help us? We didn't need them, did we? They can keep their scorch-marked clone armies and their slave droids! Leave Cularin to take care of herself. We can handle all comers!

Voices from the Crowd (not quite in unison): All comers!

San: In the spirit of victory, we want you all to contact Senator Wren. Let her know that we aren't happy with the support the Senate has offered. Cularin is sovereign! We don't need a Senate that sits on its hands for years while Thaere

tries to subjugate us, and only acts when they are forced to do so! We made it on our own for two hundred years, we've got a standing military, we've got everything we need. Why should we care about having a vote in the Senate now, when we've proven over and over that we don't need anyone but each other?

Nia: Cularin was forced to stand alone, and we stood strong! Let the Separatists try -- their Thaereian monkey-lizards couldn't do anything to us, and neither can anyone else! All comers!

Crowd: All comers!

At this point, members of the crowd -- which has been growing continuously, people streaming in from side streets to hear what the disturbance was about -- begin making their way to the makeshift platform. The first to mount the platform is a nervous-looking Devaronian, a male of middle years with a scar running across his forehead. San hands him a mic.

Devaronian: I just want to say, I been all over the place. The galaxy -- big! And Cularin's the best place I been. None of that sitting around. Problem? People do something about it! I been safer here, with wars and Siths and whatever else we got, than anywhere else. Cularin people are tough! I'm stayin'! Finally got a place I believe in!

Nia: All comers!

Crowd (starting to sound a little frenzied): All comers!

The Devaronian steps down from the platform and is replaced almost immediately by a young female Twi'lek. Her lekku twitch as she takes the mic from the Devaronian.

Twi'lek: I was born in Cularin. I never lived anywhere else and I never wanted to. I don't need the Senate! I didn't need Thaere, nobody needed Thaere, but we got them. Now we got the Senate? I don't think that's right. Let Cularin take care of Cularin!

San: She's right! The Senate is great for running a galaxy, but for our system? We can protect ourselves. Let the Senate run the rest of the galaxy!

As he speaks, the Twi'lek makes her way down and a Wookiee -- enormous and black-furred -- stomps onto the platform. It shakes dangerously beneath his massive feet. He grabs a mic from San and roars. A partial translation runs along the bottom of the screen.

Wookiee: Rawrrr! [BEEP] rorr [BEEP] rowroworwww [BEEP BEEP BEEP-BEEP]! [BEEP] grrror [BEEP-BEEP BEEP]!

Translation: Cularin! [Deleted] Thaere [deleted] insignificant, mindless [deleted]! [Deleted] the Senate [deleted]!

The crowd shouts its approval, many probably as much for the Wookiee's tone as what he said. The Wookiee raises both arms above his head and roars, inadvertently crushing the microphone in the process and sending a painful feedback shriek out over the speakers. If anything, that works the crowd into even more of a frenzy. As the Wookiee hands back the shattered mic, San exchanges a glance with Nia. They both look at the crowd, then at each other once more, lines creasing their foreheads.

San: Now, I love Cularin as much as anybody, but there's no reason to get carried away. We can take care of ourselves, we've taken out every force that's tried to knock us down, but there's no need to say -- well, anything we'd regret.

Crowd: All comers!

San looks chagrined, and barely notices when a Gungan, a blaster rifle slung across his back and a blaster pistol hanging from each hip, climbs the steps to the platform and takes the mic from his hand.

Gungan: Maxi-big, Culariners! Maxi-big your hearts! Meesa dinkin', meesa not likin' nobody but Cularin. Meesa dinkin', da fightin' not bein' done yet. Wesa needin' ta close Cularin's borders! Keep out da ones dat wants to hurt us! Mya blaster --

He swings the blaster rifle from his shoulder around and cradles it with the arm that's not currently holding the microphone.

Gungan: -- her name be Reva. Reva sayin', nobody better to be tellin' Cularin what to do, or Reva's bombad blastin' at dere faces! Dat's what Reva sayin', and meesa dinkin' dat sounds pretty good!

He raises the blaster rifle above his head and fires a rapid burst of bolts into the air. His firing is followed quickly by a half-dozen more citizens illegally discharging weapons. The statute involving penalties for unnecessarily discharging firearms within Gadrin corporate limits scrolls across the bottom of the screen, with fines and incarceration times in bold text.

Gungan: Alla comers!

Crowd: Alla comers!

The Gungan tosses the mic back to San, then blasts another volley into the sky. Now at least fifty blasters in the crowd fire with him.

San: Look, we need to be calm about this –

He's cut off as a Tarasin staggers onto the platform and grabs the mic. The Tarasin, a female of some years, stares at the mic for several seconds before spitting on the platform and taking a deep breath. Her skin tone shifts from greenish-yellow to bright yellow to red as she begins to talk.

Tarasin (slightly slurred): I'm nobody important. But my kind have been here longer than anybody else. And nothing good comes of outsiders coming here. Nothing! You all, the ones as was born here -- I love you all! You're my brothers and sisters! But we don't need no Senate, 'cause the Senate don't need us! Little backwater Cularin, not good for nothing, gonna stick 'em with a bunch of lunatics what'll want to take 'em over and try to invade and kill our friends and family. You know what I say to that? Keep your help. Too little, too late. Let Cularin be Cularin. We can take 'em on! Yeah!

Crowd: All comers!

She tries to hand the mic to San, almost drops it before he can wrap his hand around it, and then turns around and steps off the edge of the stage. Her fall is broken by the black-furred Wookiee, who catches her in mid-roar, looks a little surprised, and places her gently on her feet. Then more blasters go off, the sky turning into a fireworks display. San and Nia hurry from the platform and disappear as the throng surges forward, crushing the wood construction. The crowd continues to get rowdier, but the sound on the playback diminishes, replaced by a Cularin Central Broadcasting announcer.

Broadcast Voice-Over: For several tense minutes, it seemed that the mob might become violent. The makeshift stage was crushed, and several harsh words were exchanged. A number of small fights broke out, but thankfully, no one was hurt. Property damage was minimal, limited to a handful of broken windows. Herrera and Reston remain at large. Cularin Central Broadcasting would like to take this opportunity to officially thank the Senate, and in particular Chancellor Palpatine, for coming to Cularin's aid in the recent conflict. We would like to assure the Senate that this disturbance, while regrettable, represents a very small minority opinion, voiced at a time when it appears that at least some of the participants may have been operating with impaired judgment.

Osten Dal'Nay

"Born years ago in the Hedrett Medical Center on Cularin, Osten Dal'Nay forever yearned for the life of a soldier. Growing up with romantic tales of adventure and intrigue and visualizing no life quite as fulfilling as a life of service to his fellow beings, he enrolled at the age of eighteen in the Thaereian Navy. Thaere, at that time Cularin's Senatorially-mandated protector, had a sufficient standing military to keep whatever threats might arise clear of the system, and in the absence of any native military force within Cularin, Dal'Nay saw this as the best way to serve his home.

"As the years went on, however, Dal'Nay began to sense corruption within the Thaereian ranks. Early attempts to report such corruption brought threat of censure, leaving the young soldier uncertain as to how he could best protect his home while simultaneously upholding the vows he had made to Thaere. After being assigned to a secret base beneath Tilnes -- a base which, by his estimation, had no reason to be secret as it lay within the bounds of Cularin -- and learning that the Thaereian forces had some sort of alliance with the Metatheran Cartel (whom Dal'Nay had long distrusted), he became convinced that drastic action might need to be taken. When he learned that a group of Cularin's citizens had wandered into the wrong area of the mines of Tilnes and that an order had come down from on high for their extermination, he felt compelled to act. Abandoning his post, Dal'Nay warned the Culariners of the impending ambush and helped them escape the mines.

"Now a deserter from the Thaereian Navy, Dal'Nay went into seclusion in Cularin, slowly pulling together others, like himself, who loved and wanted to protect their home. With Broof Yurdel, a veteran of the Battle of Naboo and leader of the resistance that uncovered Metatheran Cartel misconduct on Cularin, Dal'Nay built the Cularin Militia. The heroes of Cularin responded, many enlisting and putting their own lives on the line to demonstrate that Cularin no longer needed 'protection' from Thaere. Not, at least, when that protection seemed likely to come at a high cost.

"Eventually, after significant planning, Dal'Nay, Yurdel, and the Cularin Militia struck. The ensuing conflict was only recently resolved, and for the first time in a number of years, the man who formed the foundation of Cularin's Militia finds himself with no immediate battles to fight. There exists the possibility that the Militia may be called to assist in the Clone Wars if Supreme Chancellor Palpatine should request such, but thus far the Chancellor has shown little interest in involving local militias in battles outside their own systems. So, while he plays what he refers to as a waiting game, while he continues to oversee training and deployment within the system, Dal'Nay has consented to an interview with Cularin Central Broadcasting's Yara Grugara, to answer questions about a number of recent issues that have arisen with respect to both himself, and the Militia as a whole."

Yara: Well, that was quite the introduction! I've always thought Jesi had some voice-over talent, but it seems he's also a fan of your work.

Osten (nodding): It sounds much more impressive after the fact than it felt while it was all ongoing. I'm just a citizen who did what he needed to do to protect his home. And I'm pretty sure I never used the term "waiting game."

Yara: Why is it everyone I have on this program insists on being modest? Seriously -- when you're a hero, why not be proud of it? You helped protect Cularin, after all.

Osten: The word "hero" gets thrown around a lot. I don't know anybody who acts like a hero who calls themselves one. It's like walking around and saying, "Look at me, I'm beautiful." You may be beautiful, but if you say it, people are going to dismiss you as vain.

Yara (preening): You think I'm beautiful?

Osten (pauses): That's not what I meant. It was an example. What I was trying to say was, I don't think of myself as a hero. The heroes are the soldiers who went out and fought for Cularin, who gave their lives in the conflict with Thaere. The heroes are ones who worked to carry out the orders I helped give. Once Commander Yurdel and I got the Militia rolling, we didn't have much chance to do anything heroic. We didn't get within ten thousand kilometers of most of the battles -- he may have been a little closer, leading the ground forces and all -- because we needed to be in a command post, making decisions. Making decisions is important, but heroic? I don't see it. If my life wasn't in danger, I can't call myself a hero with a straight face.

Yara: Everyone's got an opinion on that subject. I'm sure there are other things on our viewers' minds, though. Even with things calming down, you and the Militia have managed to remain in the public eye.

Osten: We're a standing military. It would be a bigger problem if nobody knew we were here.

Yara: Not exactly what Yara meant. Recently, there have been a number of stories posted to the holonet relating to the past, present, and future of the Militia. I was hoping you'd be willing to address some of these.

Osten: It's part of the reason I agreed to the interview.

Yara: Very good. I suppose the first thing I'd like to ask you about is, "The Best Defense." Have you read it?

Osten (slight smile, shaking his head): Any number of times. It's part of the editing process -- reading and re-reading.

Yara: So you wrote it, then?

Osten: Of course I did. I don't know how anyone got hold of it and why it would have been posted, but yes, I wrote it.

Yara: Are you familiar, then, with the various theories about the story? The two that I'm sure our viewers are most anxious to hear claim it's a story about what you wanted to do to a commanding officer who made you angry, or that it's some kind of confession. Comments?

Osten: You've gotten much more direct since the first time I saw you conduct an interview.

Yara: Thank you. Comments on the theories rather than my interviewing style?

Osten (smiles): Neither is correct. I only met Commander Kulkis once, and while we may not have gotten along, I was never the type to attack a superior officer.

Yara: There are those who speculate that a soldier willing to desert is not much different from a soldier who will kill an officer.

Osten (smile fades): Then they would be wrong. I did what I did on Tilnes to save lives, and because I was convinced of the wrongness of the orders I'd been given. There's a very big difference between acting to save lives, and taking a life.

Yara: I don't know much about this Kulkis . . .

She presses a series of buttons on the arm of her chair and reads something from the screen of a small datapad in her lap.

Yara: . . . but there are those who claim he was abusive. Several reports were obtained -- through sources that wish to remain anonymous -- that he often attacked enlisted men. Some of the scenarios described in the reports are eerily similar to the type of interaction you describe with him in "The Best Defense."

Osten: The best fiction is veined with truth. It's hard to create a character like Kulkis from nothing. He was a rotten individual, foul to his core. He did beat his soldiers, and anyone else who got in his way. I think every enlisted person I ever met who served under him had a different way in which they wanted him to die. One of them finally got their wish.

Yara: In exactly the way you describe. You don't find that odd?

Osten: A little ironic, I guess. But there's no evidence that he died exactly as I described in the story. He was tossed out an airlock, but there really wasn't enough left of him after the encounter with the ship to do a good autopsy, from what I've heard. Besides, I'm sure there were other stories written about individuals like Kulkis by Thaereian regulars. He wasn't the exception in their

command structure. Thaere's military was everything I ever thought a military shouldn't be. Cruel, vindictive, and focused less on keeping allies alive than on making enemies dead. There's a reason our senior intelligence officer defected from the Thaereian Navy just like I did.

Yara: Deserted, you mean. Defectors ask for asylum from the legitimate government of another system or planet. You left and went into hiding.

Osten (holds up his hands): You're right. I deserted. I set a poor example for the soldiers I would later ask to follow me in that regard. But I think I set a better example by standing up for what I knew to be right and standing up against what I knew to be wrong. By the time our intelligence officer came over, though, I was officially able to offer him asylum. So, if we're being technical, he did defect, and I did desert.

Yara: Did you kill Kulkis?

Osten: A young soldier wrote a story based on things he had heard about an unpleasant individual. That story was meant to convey certain military truths -- that some orders are not to be followed, that some officers are not worth following, and that you cannot take anything in any relationship for granted. The story should be read as metaphor, not literal truth, and discussing it as literal truth makes about as much sense as discussing mynock meat as good soup stock.

Yara: So the story does not reflect an encounter between yourself and Commander Kulkis?

Osten: Anyone who believes that is delusional. I have killed more than my share of people, but it's always been in combat. I have never killed someone with their own weapon and dumped them out an airlock.

Yara: Good enough for me. Now, how about the documentation that was released to our offices recently regarding this Cloud Force unit?

Osten: There is no such beast.

Yara: And if there were, would you be able to tell me about it?

Osten: Of course not. If such a unit existed, it would be classified, and I certainly couldn't confirm or deny any rumors about it.

Yara: So your position would be that the documentation we received, the memo addressed to you from -- Sergeant Drover?

Osten: There is no such individual in the Cularin Militia.

Yara: Your position would therefore be that the memo was fraudulent.

Osten: It would.

At this point, the transmission was disrupted by sunspot activity. The full transcript can be downloaded from the holonet at . . .

Marching Orders

Eventually, all wars arrive at one terrible truth -- they need soldiers to fight and more soldiers to replace the fallen. Once this occurs, war becomes less an exercise in morality or righteousness and more a constantly churning grinder mashing the best of a generation into dust beneath its terrible gears. Across the known galaxy, the Clone Wars have become this beast; most now fight because the constant combat is all they know.

Tragically, inevitably, this beast slouches toward Cularin. Its blood-rimmed eye looks toward the Jedi that defend that system and the world's valuable resources. The inhabitants of this once-independent system must quickly realize that only two options remain: fight or die.

"This isn't right!" Even from her infirmary bed, still recovering from the surgical replacement of her ruined arm, Master Devan's fierce beliefs could not remain silent. "What you are doing here is wrong!"

Master Jeht gazed down at her from his vantage point in doorway to her room. Dressed completely in ashen grays and black, even his light Jedi combat armor was the color of a starless night sky. Pulling on battle gloves, he shook his head and stared impassively. "It isn't wrong. It is what the Council has ordered us to do."

"Poo doo!" And as her temper flared, the nearby tray of ignored food began to rattle on its rolling table.

Jeht made a gesture and it fell still. "You need to watch your emotions, Master Devan." His eyes grew even darker, quite a striking expression given their

already total lack of color. "Trust me; you don't want to let your anger get the better of you."

She glared at him, only relenting because he was right. "Save it for your apprentices, Darrus. They don't know you like I do. They might not realize how much of a hypocrite you are." Her words were cold, but her eyes were still blazing.

A swell of rage rose up in his heart, but Jeht quickly drove it back down. Outwardly, he remained as calm as ever. "I suppose I deserved that, but attacking me won't change anything." His gloves buckled tight, Master Jeht checked his lightsaber and blaster before turning to face Devan completely. "And you are wrong to call anyone my apprentice. I don't have any business teaching anymore."

He gestured to the hall behind him, a passageway Master Devan knew well as it led to the Academy's hanger and spaceport. "The Jedi assembling down there are just Jedi now. No Padawans, no learners. Right now, the Clone Wars allows only two kinds -- knights and younglings." He stared into her eyes and felt a moment of cool satisfaction as she flinched. "Almas is fortunate the Council is leaving you the latter." And with that, he spun on a leather-booted heel and started to walk away.

It was everything she could do, and more effort than she could safely muster, but Devan managed to climb out of bed and reach the ebon-robed Jedi Master before he stepped completely out of her room. "Jeht . . . Darrus," her voice was still rough from the injuries she had suffered at the hands of the Jedi Killer, but it was still loud enough to convey her desperation. "Don't do this!"

He looks down at where her hands, one flesh and blood while the other was shining chrome and steel pistons, clutched at his arm. For a moment, his eyes betrayed a flicker of the compassion she was trying to appeal to, but then it vanished. "Master Devan, I am not doing anything. The Council has ordered that all Jedi report to strategic locations for reassignment and military commissions. High-ranking positions are set aside for Almas's Jedi. It is really quite an honor."

She almost slapped him for that, and he could see it in her eyes. In truth, he would have preferred she had done so. It could have matched the slap he actually had received an hour earlier when he told the Academy's other female Master the same news. For a moment, that Master had almost become the

Black Queen she once was, but then her anger faded. Jeht knew that in time, Devan's would as well.

Instead, she tried something else. "Darrus, has Lanius been told about this . . . 'honor'?" He could see in her eyes the hope she was clinging to as tightly as she was his arm. If Lanius was not informed yet, perhaps the Academy's Headmaster could overrule or at least delay the Council's decision.

"I'm sorry, Master Devan. I delivered the order to him the moment I arrived on Almas. He has pledged whatever support the Academy can give." He could see the hope dying in her gaze, her entire expression falling even as her strength failed her. Though she probably hated him for it, Darrus gently carried her back to bed.

He started to walk off without a word, but as he reached the door he glanced back. "Your condition gives you a temporary reprieve from these marching orders, Master Devan, though I fully expect you are opting for the same choice Master Lanius and the rest of the Academy staff have made personally."

He paused at the doorframe, knowing that as soon as his words sank in, she would ask him what he meant. He did not have to wait long.

"What . . . what choice?"

"The Right of Denial, of course. I would beg you to reconsider, but I doubt you would hear me. I will be on my ship, awaiting the last of the Jedi here . . . or their lightsabers." He sighed deeply before continuing out into the hall. "Goodbye, Devan."

She was too stunned to respond. The Right of Denial was an almost unheard-of act, one that in these dark times could almost be seen as treason. It was a Jedi tradition, though, and if Lanius had invoked it for himself, could she actually bring herself not to do the same?

She buried her head in her hands, feeling the brush of cold metal on her left cheek, as Master Jeht's sharp footfalls vanished into the distance. She had so hoped things would get better in the Cularin system after the fall of the Jedi Killer, but now things seemed so much worse.

* * * * *

Twenty-four hours later, Master Jeht's ship, the *Maelstrom*, passed a pair of Republic battle cruisers on their way into the system. The first cruiser hailed him and, though deeply concerned with the morale and concerns of his Jedi cargo, Darrus took the hail immediately.

The clone commander in charge of the cruiser snapped to attention on his viewscreen. "Sir, the cruisers *Reliant* and *Devout* await your command. Are we cleared to proceed?"

Darrus blinked for a moment, but tried not to let his surprise show. He was not expecting any other ships to enter this part of space, especially after the Senate's previous refusals to send support vessels to aid Cularin. Instead of communicating his confusion, he chose a more neutral tone and simply replied, "Your orders?"

"To move into the system and secure it under martial law as dictated by the Emergency Powers Act, general. Without an active Jedi Academy, this system cannot be allowed to remain unprotected. Sir."

Darrus nodded, though inwardly he was shocked. Martial law? How could that be? Surely it was not legal, even under the EPA, to place a star system with active Senate leadership under military control.

"And this system's Senator -- Lavina Wren?"

The clone soldier nodded sharply and didn't miss a breath before responding. "Senator Wren is currently under investigation concerning allegations of seditious behavior and collusion with the Separatists." After a moment's pause, he continued. "The Grand Chancellor has gone on record in support of the Senator and has expressed his assurance that such charges are utterly baseless, but while the investigation continues, this system needs military protection more than ever."

Darrus sank deeper into thought, wondering just what was going on here. What was he seeing? Was a pattern emerging from all this? And if so, what image did it form? Trying to focus his mind, Master Jeht recalled his mentor's teachings and tried desperately to find the shatterpoint here -- the point at which everything was breaking down.

His concentration was broken before he could finish. "Sir? Do we proceed?"

Darrus sighed and nodded. There was nothing else he could do. If the Senator was compromised, and many of the system's Jedi leaving Cularin with him, these worlds would need all the defense they could get. He hated the idea of martial law, but with so many planets already under military command, it was really only a matter of time before Cularin followed suit. Better now, with troops he knew and for a better reason than most. The Chancellor knew what he was doing; Jeht had to keep believing that.

"The order is given, commander. You may proceed. But Almas is to be left alone. It will be under my personal authority. No troops should land there, and its air space must be left alone to expedite my return."

The clone trooper did not hesitate. "As you command."

Once the transmission ended and his own troopers went back to their various tasks around the bridge, Jeht whispered under his breath, "It's the best I can do, Lanius. It's the best I can do."

A Hero's Death

<<posttime 11:00:38>>

<<postdate [yesterday]>>

<<userid Baylan>>

<<postloc Central holonet node 1.1>>

Whenever I do a node search, wherever I am, to see where people are talking about me -- there's Cularin. It's like, people here talk about everything, got all kinds of problems, but then there's this need to talk about me. Baylan.

A lot of you are gonna look at this and say, "It's not him." Well, it is, but there's nothing I can do to convince anyone who doesn't already believe. So I'm not gonna try. The ones of you who'll listen will listen anyway. The ones who won't, wouldn't listen if I was the Supreme Chancellor his own self. So my name's not for credentialing, it's just because it's who I am. And maybe it'll make a difference, because I guess some of you think I'm something special. I'm just another slicer. I figured out a couple things nobody else figured out, and I worked hard to get where I am. Which is pretty much nowhere that anybody knows about, but whatever -- it's not about me.

I was looking around, reading up on what's been going on in Cularin, and I gotta say:

Get out. Just leave. It can't possibly be worth all the pain you people are going through. I mean you got what, invading systems, Sith-worshipping freaks, evil crimelords, and those snouty little bleeders from Caarimon? You gotta think that there's a better place to live. I never had to fight anybody in my life. You people have to fight every day. Is that right? Life should be easy. You do what you do to get by. You don't put your neck on the line. You've got a militia, right? A pile of Jedi? Let them fight the wars. Let them put down the little Sithlings. Let them do the protecting. There's no call to be all "heroic." Being heroic only gets you one thing: An early funeral with a closed casket. What a load of rot.

I know I may be saying some things many of you don't want to hear, but you've got to be real with yourselves. I read what the Jedi say -- "There is no death, there is the Force."

Again: Rot. If there is no death, how come when a Jedi gets shot enough times, he stops breathing? I don't need some sort of metaphysical explanation for what comes after, how we become one with the Force. What we got is what we got, and we got our time, and if we use it well, if we waste it, that's our call. But you can't go through life thinking you're invincible, thinking that if you turn the wrong corner and some bloke blasts a hole in your head the size of a small moon, everything'll be all right. It won't. You'll be dead.

Sorry if it seems like I'm not sympathetic to people who got it rough, but the fact is, if you don't have to be off fighting evil this week, and you go off fighting evil, you're not a hero. You're a loon. Being a hero is so overrated -- look what it's getting all those heroic Jedi. It's getting them killed. Not that it matters too much to them, they had their lives taken away by their Order. No families, no attachments, nothing to hold them to the galaxy. You tell someone who's got no family that there's no such thing as death, of course they're gonna run right out and put themselves in harm's way! Because it's what they been trained to do.

Look, I'm not saying the Jedi are brainwashed. And not just because there's still enough of them that if they decided to hunt me down and slice me up with their lightsabers, they probably could. It's just their ideas. They conveniently coincide with a kind of behavior that makes no rational sense. They're the

ultimate soldiers. There's no reason for them to fear dying, if they believe the Jedi Code, and if they don't believe the Jedi Code, they got no identity, see? It's like, you believe, and that's part of what makes a Jedi. That belief. That faith. So they can go into whatever battle they want and not care so much about dying.

But what if they're wrong? Hmm? What if there *is* death? What if the Force doesn't stop that, and when you're gone, you're just gone?

That's the problem all the heroes that aren't dead yet have. They just don't get it. You put yourself out there, let people shoot at you, and if they get lucky, maybe you're just gone. Just like that. Everything you worked for, everything you trained for -- gone. You ever stop to think about that? Everything you ever did, all your hard work, all those hours you spent fiddling with your blaster or building your lightsaber -- gone. Blink and it's over. Life's funny like that.

You gotta play it smart. Pick your battles, don't let your battles pick you. There's no reason to go and act the hero, when it's just going to get you killed.

And it will. That's what happens to folks who fancy themselves heroes. You rush into that burning warehouse, there's no guarantee you're coming out again. You wander out and try to hunt down something what was sent to kill you, you know what's more than likely to happen? It's gonna kill you! That's its PURPOSE TO EXIST!

S'not astrophysics, people. There's a reason you hear so many stories about heroes and their grand sacrifices -- it's because they're dead! They went out and tried something stupid one too many times, and got themselves dead from it.

When it comes right down to it, if you ask me, there's no such thing as a live hero. There's ones who think they're heroes, but aren't dead yet, and history'll judge them. Then there's the ones who're already dead, and people decided, yeah, he was a hero, look at all the little kids he saved. Or yeah, she was a hero, she didn't quite defuse the thermal detonator, but she got it away from the crowd of people in time. And Cularin's got a lot of people who get called "heroes," which makes me think that unless you smarten up, there's gonna be a lot of you getting dead before too much longer.

It's a classic thing I'm doing right now, that I blast people for. Coming in and giving opinions that nobody asked for? Not the way to make yourself popular.

Of course, life's not about being popular. I get what respect I need, and the rest -- well, to hell with the rest. I got as much responsibility to speak what I see as true as anybody else, and if maybe I shoot my fool mouth off and it keeps someone from getting dead, well, then so be it. I guess I done my good deed for the day, then.

Angry yet? Ready to go out and fight some evil just to prove me wrong?

Right. Here's the thing. Cularin's full of fools and dreamers who think they can be heroes, but are only going to end up dead. Because that's how things go. You dare the rancor to bite, the rancor's gonna bite. Fools and dreamers headed for an early grave.

But you know what the galaxy lacks?

Fools and dreamers. Look at what we've got fighting our wars. Clones and droids. Not even real people, just armies led by Jedi or commanded from orbiting ships. A bunch of things that never been fooled, never dreamed a dream of their own. If you're still reading by now, I'm thinking you're probably right fired up, ready to go out and prove me wrong.

Good. S'what I wanted. Because you know what people say about Cularin, all over the galaxy?

Nothing. You fight the good fight, you put your lives on the line, and what gets play on the holonet? A bunch of lab-bred womprats that never knew what it meant to fight for themselves or for anything they loved. A senate so dead-set on continuing to muck up the galaxy that they can't recognize that everything they're doing is a bad idea, that too much order creates division, that continuing to put the fate of the galaxy in the hands of beings with no fate at all does nothing but disenfranchise the fools and dreamers, when it's the bloody fools and dreamers who built the galaxy!

Nobody asked me my opinion. But I figure, you been fighting all this time for something nobody believes can happen. You want peace, you want the bad guys out, you want to be able to control your destiny. That's not how the galaxy's set up, but it's what every one of you who goes out and gets all foolishly heroic is going after. That dream.

This mess we're in? I don't know what to do about it. It's not like we need more heroes. Like I said, they're dead. What we need is simpler.

Fools and dreamers. Keep strong, Cularin, you foolish, dreaming lot. Keep fighting. Maybe you all die. But if you don't, you know what?

You win.

Try to stay alive. A dead hero's not worth nothing. A live fool can be pretty blasted inspiring, though.

Cloud Force

The following memorandum was leaked to a member of Cularin's news media this morning. It is unclear why the leak occurred, or what the individual who provided the information sought to obtain. According to media sources, no credits or any other form of payment exchanged hands. If the media is to be believed, the source simply felt it appropriate to keep the people of Cularin "informed" as to the operations of the Militia.

The source was quoted as saying, "This is no time for us to be developing specialized units. We should be going on the offensive against the enemies of Cularin. Logically, a division like this can target only internal threats. Either the leadership of the Militia knows something the rest of us don't, or they're afraid to leave the system and go help in the war on the Separatists. Either way, it's a problem."

The imprecision of the language has led some to question whether this is actually a Militia document. Thus far, however, the Militia has had no official comment . . .

Internal Memo

To: Osten Dal'Nay, Commander

Fr: C. Drover, Sgt.

RE: Cloud Force

Date: [yesterday]

Commander Dal'Nay,

I felt it appropriate to inform you that Division Cloud Force is ahead of schedule. Our original timeline targeted strategic mobilization three months from now; our current timeline puts us combat-ready in three weeks. The

training budget provided, and the technologies developed by Cularin Militia researchers, have greatly enhanced the unit's readiness. The goals of the division continue to be met, and I am confident that the soldiers will perform up to the high standards set for our Militia. In order to clarify our progress, I will address each of the charges laid before myself and Sgt. Korvalis at the formation of Cloud Force.

- 1. To create the infrastructure necessary to support a division of soldiers capable of deploying individually or in small strike teams within the atmosphere of Genarius for combat.**

Sgt. Korvalis and I recruited half a dozen senior enlisted personnel to assist in designing and managing Cloud Force. We then began making rounds of zero-g training facilities to identify those individuals whose physiologic traits predisposed them to success in such environments. Because the unit is relatively small, the infrastructure necessary was minimal, and the training required for those who would command units within the division quickly completed. The similarities of operating inside the gas cloud to operating in a deep space environment further speeded the training of our leadership core. Appropriate connections were made within the naval and ground branches of the Militia to ensure full coordination of activities as Division Cloud Force approached operation status.

- 2. To obtain sufficient motivated personnel to allow 12 autonomous strike teams to be created.**

As was mentioned previously, Sgt. Korvalis and I focused our initial search on zero-g training facilities to identify the leadership core. We then utilized the knowledge brought to the division by these leaders to enlist soldiers with the appropriate temperament to be part of Cloud Force. Initial queries were made through interviews with candidates identified by those in command of the division, but no offers to join were extended. Instead, we allowed word of Cloud Force to spread among the soldiers. After letting rumors circulate for eight days, we posted a call for volunteers. For 250 slots, we received 1,139 applications.

Of these, 672 were immediately disqualified for medical or mental health reasons. The remainder were tested repeatedly in zero-g and

high-g environments and forced through a series of exercises designed to test the limits of their strength and endurance. Specs for all exercises were submitted to your office prior to project onset, so I will not reiterate them here.

215 volunteers failed to complete the physical trials; of these, 14 were medically discharged and three were regrettably killed. Incident reports relating to the deaths of these soldiers were submitted to your office as well, and their families have been notified and compensated consistent with Militia policy. The 252 remaining soldiers were divided into 12 units and one of our previously trained soldiers was put in command.

3. To provide sufficient intensive training to have the units operational within six months of training onset.

You may refer to my memos of [date 90 days ago] and [date 62 days ago] for details on our training procedures. Utilizing resources within Genarius, including facilities on and beneath Nub Saar, and utilizing bases on [BLACKED OUT] and [BLACKED OUT], training commenced. Troops skirmished regularly against droid opposition and undertook numerous man-on-ship attack sequences. Strategies were developed and implemented to assist individual and strike team success against superior opposition. Total losses during training have been filed with your office; 233 soldiers remain active in Cloud Force. As reported initially, I expect that we will be fully operational within three weeks, and encourage you to make initial assignments of Cloud Force at that time. The soldiers are prepared to serve Cularin in any way you deem necessary.

4. To oversee development of technologies to aid strike team efficacy in atmospheric conditions generally unfavorable to combat on a scale smaller than ship to ship.

Because neither Sgt. Korvalis nor I are technicians by trade, we recruited a team of technicians from other Militia branches. Once the technicians were briefed on the mission of Cloud Force, they began working to develop appropriate gear to aid in the conduct of our missions. Several key pieces of technology have come from their work, and I will be submitting the names of several of these individuals for commendations, at your discretion. The tech developed includes:

Gasmasker. Worn on the back but with a sensor on the chest, the gasmasker recreates the pattern of gas molecules that existed prior to the soldier's interference with them in order to mask the soldier's movement. I am told that the masker precisely replicates the state of the atmospheric gas on Genarius, even accounting for natural currents, to make it more difficult for sensors or visual inspection to pinpoint the trajectory of our soldiers. Testing of the device is ongoing.

Light Radiation Suit. The LRS is a variant of the armored flight suit that is standard issue to all soldiers in the Militia's naval branch. Most of the actual armor has been removed, and the seals have been reinforced to allow for extended exposure to vacuum environments. In addition, the suit is constructed from [BLACKED OUT], a material which testing indicates makes it nearly impervious to radiation. Further treatments with a combination of chemicals (see my report dated [23 days ago] for specifics) are ongoing.

Due to numerous incidences of radiation poisoning during training exercises, we have also begun issuing protobactin cylinders and injection kits to all Cloud Force soldiers. The LRS is being redesigned to accommodate an injection panel so that protobactin can be administered without breaking the seal on the suits, in the event that a soldier is exposed to the gas mixture while not wearing his/her suit but does not become symptomatic until the suit is again being worn.

The training regimen we have developed is intense, and the funding for both training and technology is greatly appreciated. Sgt. Korvalis and I would welcome a visit from yourself or one of your designees any time you feel an inspection is warranted.

Cordially,
Drover

Time After Time

The Cularin system is still reeling from the imposition of Martial Law and the loss of its long-time criminal "leadership." Many believe there is nothing left

that can shock them any longer. Those folks would be wrong, and many are about to discover that error. When the entire Cularin system shifted forward 10 years in time, most thought that was as strange as their world could get. They, too, are wrong.

The effects of the Darkstaff, the Sith artifact at the heart of many of Cularin's woes, is still making its presence felt. Time, it would seem, is far more broken within the confines of Cularin than anyone realized . . .

Eventually, the boss told his pet thug to stop, and the Trandoshan's scaly fist ceased its seemingly constant assault. There wasn't a single part of the young Twi'lek's body that didn't hurt, especially around the face and lekku areas.

"So, tell me again, Guster," said the irritated Human, "how is it you're standing here -- well, kneeling and bleeding here -- while all my other men are so much lizard fodder out in the jungle?"

Guster, or Gust Toruna to the parents who disowned him years ago, just shook his head -- an action that hurt all the way down. "I -- I -- just don't know," he stammered through swollen lips. "I swear I'm telling you the truth. Please -- please don't hurt me no more, Vex." Of course, with his face feeling like one big bruise, Guster couldn't be sure how much of that could be understood.

Apparently, Vex was well versed in the language of pain. "But with my shipment in the hands of Riboga's goons and all my other couriers dead because of them, you're the only entertainment I can buy with all those lost creds, Guster." As the crime boss gestured, his Trandoshan enforcer raised its brutal fist once more.

"Wait!" Guster screamed. "I swear I'm telling you the truth. I *did* die, Vex. I could feel it! I swear!"

Vex smoothed down the front of his rancor hide trench coat, signaled for the Trandoshan to punch Guster once more, and then watched as the thug hoisted the Twi'lek off the ground. "And yet you're still here, breathing and bubbling and pleading for your worthless life. So tell me, slay-mo, how exactly am I supposed to believe you?"

"Because --" Guster's vision was fading, but he shook his head and it cleared for a few moments, "Because it's the truth." He spit bluish blood onto the alley floor. "Could I make up a story like that?"

Vex considered that, steeping his fingers together in thought. The Trandosha looked at him quizzically, but he gestured for the big thug to drop Guster onto the pavement. The Twi'lek was in such rough shape, he wouldn't be running anywhere for a long while.

"All right, Guster. You've said something intelligent -- finally. You're a coward and a cheat, but you aren't entirely stupid. If you *were* going to lie to me, you'd have made up a better story."

Hope dawned in Guster's one visible eye, but it dwindled again as the red-haired Human whirled around to glare at him. "Tell me again, word for fraggin' word, everything that happened out there, and if even *one word* doesn't match what you said before, I'll have Raptor here finish what she's started."

Guster nodded. He almost thanked Vex for his life, but thought better of it. All the crime boss wanted was his story again, so that's what he'd tell. He knew it would match, word for word, because for the first time in his miserable life, it was the utter and entire truth.

It took a while for him to calm down and clear his mouth enough to talk, but the swig of Hedrett oil-rig whiskey -- so magnanimously provided by Vex -- helped even as it burned like crazy. Eventually, though, his words didn't sound like he had a maw full of marbles. As the leather-clad criminal and his overly hostile bodyguard listened closely, Guster's fantastic tale unfolded again.

* * * * *

"So we were at the drop point just like you told us to be, right? There was Kello and Dusty on their swoops, Nardakka in the transport, and me and Shilly in her custom speeder. Everything was going right, you know? Plenty of sun and lots of visibility. It was a perfect clearing. Frells, even Dusty said so.

"Anyways, we'd been there maybe twenty ticks and Kello was starting to get nervous, like maybe the marks weren't going to show. I know he didn't want to come back empty handed like we did on that Merr-Sonn run, so everyone was worried the deal wasn't going down. Dusty kept checking his comm to make sure no one was trying to call, but we were getting good signal.

"The whole deal seemed like a no-show. We should have aborted when it hit half past the hour and still no one was there, but Kello kept saying, 'Just a few minutes, just a few more minutes.' I started to get that feeling again, you know, like all Nar Shaddaa was about to break loose. I should have listened. We should have left.

"Riboga's people sprung their trap on us as soon as we let our guard down. Dusty jumped off his swoop to go handle 'business' in the trees and next thing we know, there was this strangled cry and the a blaster whine. Then Dusty's body fell back into the clearing, smoking from the crater in his face.

"The next thing I knew, the transport was flipping end over end, bits of Wookiee fur and worse everywhere. Nardakka had been sitting on a thermal mine the whole time we'd been there and didn't know it. They must have had the thing on remote, because Kello almost lost his swoop to another mine but pulled away at the last minute -- not that it saved him. A second later, massed blaster fire came pouring out of the tree line. Kel-kel went down in the first volley, all that nice new armor you bought him fragged to splinters. It was -- untidy.

"So Shilly yells, 'Echoota this!' which was the first intelligent thing I'd heard all day, and guns the speeder. It took a bunch of blaster shots to the side, but we managed to get out of that clearing of death. Shilly got us onto a trail and opened up the speeder's engine. I spared a little hope that maybe we'd gotten away clean and free.

"I was wrong.

"The gunmen, all wearing combat fatigues and blast helmets, took off after us, chasing us down on military-grade combat bikes. This was real hardware I'm talking, with onboard guns and targeting computers and such. Shilly was good, real good, but we were just outgunned. We must have made it almost back here to Hedrett before they finally caught us, but eventually they burned us down. I remember the back of the speeder exploding and Shilly disappearing in a blast of fire and molten metal. Ugly way to go.

"Next thing I knew, I was busted up and leaning against a tree with all these bikes zipping past. I had a fleeting thought that maybe they'd think I was dead and move on, but it just wasn't my day. The last bike slowed down just long enough to swivel its gun around and blow me into the next life.

"Which, apparently, is this one, Vex. I remember the gun coring me straight out. My chest lit up and I know -- I mean *I know* -- that I was dead. Except that one second I was, and the next I wasn't. The world went black and then, just as fast, it came back. I was still sitting against the tree, the trunk behind me burned and my clothes shredded, but I was intact. Totally unhurt. Never felt better in my life. Well, until I walked back here.

"That's how it happened, Vex. I swear on my mother's lekku, I ain't lying. I can't explain how it went down or why I'm still breathing, but it's the pure-as-blue-ryll truth!"

* * * * *

Vex considered each word of the story. If nothing else, it matched exactly what the worthless bagman had said when he first stumbled incoherently into the office. Vex pointed his blaster pistol at the Twi'lek. "You know what, Guster?"

The pale-blue petty crook looked up from where he was still kneeling on the ground, and then closed his one good eye. "Wh -- wh -- what?"

The crime boss dropped his arm, letting the pistol point toward the floor, and smiled calmly. "I believe you. That's just too fantastic a tale to make up, especially for a two-bitter like you with no imagination."

The Twi'lek nodded. "Right, Vex! Just like I said!"

Vex tossed the pistol to Raptor, a slow and easy throw that the female Trandoshan caught with no effort at all. "Even so, I'd like to see this immortality of yours for myself. Rapt, if you would do the honors?"

The Trandoshan thug smiled a toothy, lethally wide grin and aimed the pistol at Guster's head.

In a panic, the Twi'lek held up his hands and shouted, "But -- but -- Vex, I don't know if it'll happen again!"

The crime lord flipped up the collar of his trench coat. "Exactly, Guster. Let's find out."

And before the cringing thief could protest further, Raptor squeezed down on the burnished chrome trigger of Vex's custom blaster. For Guster, the world went dark for a second time . . .

Dark Hands

Living in the Cularin system, it doesn't take very long to realize that life is far from black and white. Sometimes, the shades of gray blur so badly that it can be impossible to tell right from wrong. In a star system with a deceased crime lord as one of its greatest heroes, values like law, justice, and nobility can take on entirely new meanings. On Cularin, crime usually pays, innocence can get you killed, mercy sometimes gives the enemy a second shot, and the good guys often wear black . . .

He was running so fast that it was getting hard to breathe. The complex sprawled on forever, with walks of moving metal all around. This Separatist facility was in charge of making dwarf spider droids -- small walking robots with massive guns and sophisticated targeting arrays. A staple of the Separatist ground assault forces all over the galaxy, the droids were very important to the war effort and extremely effective in battle.

Effective, it would seem, against anything but a Jedi. As he fled through the factory, he managed to rasp another order into his wrist comm. At his words, a wall of steel doors slid open, and a dozen walkers clattered into the corridor behind him. He spared himself one look back, just long enough to see the droids opening fire on the hellion chasing him.

Sparks and blaster fire were all he could glimpse, but the sounds were unmistakable. The low hum of an energy blade and the shearing screams of rent metal meant he'd bought himself less time than he'd hoped. He had to get to the control platform, had to get to the communications console, had to warn the Count that the facility had been compromised. If the Jedi knew about this place, it was only a matter of time before the Republic Army arrived -- assuming it wasn't here already.

His brief respite ended with a sudden explosion behind him. For a fleeting moment, he held onto a dim hope that the detonation had killed his adversary. That was dashed by a sudden high-pitched whine that rose sharply over him --

the distinct sound of a Jedi, lightsaber blazing, leaping into the air. Wide eyed, he looked up and saw a billow of robes disappear into the shadowed scaffolding high above the factory floor.

He had no time to lose; the Jedi could be anywhere now. Turning sharply at the smelting chambers, he dashed down a long corridor lined in steel and cooling fans. Normally, the oscillating blowers would have kept the temperature in the passageway moderate, but the Jedi's first strike upon entering the complex was to take out all secondary systems. Now only internal doors could open, and the floor-level climate controls were gone. That meant a grueling run through oppressive heat.

The strain was already beginning to show. He could hear his heart beating like a Wookiee war drum, though whether it came from fear or exertion, he couldn't tell. In any case, he was reaching his limits. If he didn't make it to the comm array soon, the Jedi wouldn't have to worry about stopping him.

He was only a few steps from the end of the corridor when the broken pieces of a battle droid clattered into the passage from a side hallway. A silhouette, backlit by the glow of a lightsaber, fell over the severed robot's parts. With a yelp of terror, he gathered his strength and used his own abandoned Jedi training to make a tremendous leap toward the ceiling.

It was everything he could do to reach the low-hanging girder, but he caught it and scrambled up onto it quickly. For a few precious seconds, he caught his breath, and then he tried desperately to mask his thoughts and cloud the perceptions of the Jedi on his heels. Since turning his back on the Jedi Council and joining Count Dooku's secession, he'd learned so many truths about the Force. The power of what the Jedi would so falsely label the dark side was his to command. Now he used it to try to conceal himself.

After several minutes of rest, he felt confident enough to move on. Shielded in the powers of confusion and doubt, he was channeling his own fear and the anger that comes from being afraid. It was making him stronger -- perhaps even strong enough now to cut down that Jedi fool.

Riding high on dark emotions, he leapt from rafter to rafter over the tumultuous factory floor. Below him, he caught glimpses of the Jedi in combat with the facility's defenders. Most of the guards were droids of one kind or another, but the occasional Geonosian also contributed to the fracas. He shared his master's dislike for anything not Human, but even he had to admit

the strange aliens had excellent mechanical skills. It was a shame to see so many of them cut down as he made his escape, but that's really all their lives were worth, weren't they?

He made it to the center pylon of the factory and slid down. The moment his feet touched the steel floor, his lightsaber was in hand. He kept the weapon off to avoid drawing attention while he accessed the command codes for the communication matrix. But he wanted it ready in case the impossible happened and a single Jedi made it through everything the facility could unleash against intruders.

Suddenly, he glimpsed a shadow flitting by and heard a metallic clattering sound at his feet. Looking down, he had just enough time to register the source of the sound before he instinctively hurled himself out of the way and rolled down the main gantry nearby. An explosion ripped apart the factory's main console -- right where he'd been standing just seconds before -- and shattered the installation's main support column in a blaze of fire and light.

A grenade? What kind of Jedi uses grenades? He picked himself up, ignoring the pain in his back and side where he'd landed awkwardly. His arrogance and confidence began to dim as he realized what that detonation had cost him. Without the array, he had no chance to contact Count Dooku. There was no way to call for a rescue or warn the massing Separatist fleet of the facility's plight.

A voice rang out of the shadows, impossible to locate directly. "If it helps, the transmission dish is already destroyed. You could not have gotten a message out in any case." The voice had an odd tone -- not mocking or cruel, but strangely resigned, almost hesitant.

He ignited his lightsaber, the brilliant white-blue beam a measure of comfort in what was rapidly becoming a very chilling world. "Damn you! The Separatist cause is just! You and your corrupt Council serve an outdated regime!" He knew his words were useless, but they made him feel better as he waited for the Jedi to show himself.

He didn't expect what happened next. "You are probably right," sighed the voice.

Mind reeling, he blinked. "I'm right? But if you don't believe in the war, why are you fighting?" Could he have been wrong about this intruder? He'd heard

that to prove her mettle, the Dark Jedi Ventress had sliced her way through an arena of gladiators and even tried to kill Dooku himself. Was this all some destructive way to get the same kind of attention?

I am not here to join you.

The Jedi was in his head! But how? His mind was protected by the dark side. No Jedi should have been able to penetrate such a wall of shadows and hate. "Then . . . then why are you here? Why have you done all this?"

He raised his lightsaber and tried to see past its cerulean glow, seeking to find his adversary with his thoughts, his feelings. The dark metal all around him provided a hundred places for an assassin to cower, but nothing living could hide from the Force.

"I was sent by the Council to stop you. To shut down this factory and stop its flow of droids into the war. And I was sent for you. Your defection cannot be allowed. You made a commitment to the Jedi Order." The sound literally seemed to be coming from all around him. Terror began to seep back into the darkest places of his heart. Reaching out with the Force, he tried to find the speaker and was met only with shadows once more.

"But you don't believe what you're doing is just! I can sense your doubt!" He paused for a moment and then continued, now wholly certain of the claim he was about to make. "You've already started down the path to the dark side! Why would you serve the Republic when you know it's wrong?"

In that moment, he sensed an echo of a troubled mind, heavily burdened with guilt, doubt, and regret. He knew exactly where the Jedi was now -- standing right behind him! With a shout of rage, he let the dark side burn through him and swung around in a deadly arc, channeling all of his fury into a single, devastating blow.

But halfway through his swing, a black-gloved hand drove the hilt of an unignited lightsaber into his chest. The searing pain of its violet blade erupting into life was the last thing he ever felt. His hands spasmed open and sent his own saber crashing to the floor. Dead before he fell, he missed the answer to his question.

"Because sometimes we just have to do as we're told."

Idiosyncrasies

Duty. It was the watchword for Cularin's heroes long before the Clone Wars. When their world, their lives, and their loved ones were threatened, the brave men and women of the Cularin system have selflessly acted to save all they hold dear. It was duty that drove them to establish their own militia against the tyranny of a corrupt military force many times their own number. It was duty that brought them time and time again into conflict with the twisted minions of the dark side of the Force when naught else could withstand their evil.

The children of Cularin know well the call of duty and the terrible price it often exacts . . .

Warlan Tosk was having a bad day. There were irritating days, there were annoying days, and then there were bad days. This definitely shot way past the first two and was far exceeding the third. It was almost its own category. If he were the kind to use harsh language, Warlan could have said exactly what kind of day he was having, but barring a string of invectives that would have set fire to the surroundings, "bad day" would simply have to suffice.

He held up the security datapad one more time, desperate to achieve some form of communication with the clerk in front of him. "Do you see this?" He pointed at a graphic near the bottom of the screen. "Do you know what this is?"

The ambivalent-looking Human woman made a decent show of pretending to care as she looked at the screen for the hundredth time. She knew that if she didn't answer this man's questions, he was likely never going away. "Yes, sir. It's a Republic Senate Seal."

"Correct." Warlan was guardedly optimistic now. At least she was acknowledging obvious facts. Now to try for something just a little bit harder. "And do you know what it means?"

She looked up into the bothersome man's eyes. He was handsome in a harried way, not too muscular but athletic in build. With his dark brown hair and bright green eyes, he was exactly the kind of man she'd normally date a few times and then never get called by again. Men like him always broke her heart, and if this particular version of that walking pain thought he was going to get

anywhere with her, he was sadly mistaken. Yes, it was petty revenge, but it was *her* petty revenge.

"No, sir."

He almost screamed. "You work for the Senate! You are an administrator at a Republic Holding Facility! How can you not know that this seal is a legal authorization for the document upon which it appears?!?" And then he breathed, rather hard, as that had all been one long exhalation.

"Well, I do now. Thank you." She found it fun to watch him twist in the wind. Oh, she knew his type -- loud, bossy, gorgeous . . . It was definitely time to wiggle the knife now. "But this is not a holding facility. It's a protected safehouse for Senators and other governmental --"

"Yes, it IS a holding center!" Warlan screamed in frustration, but only a little, and much to her delight. Then he tried to calm down; losing his professionalism was not going to do Ms. Wren any good. "Look, just because it has Durosian marble columns out front and an indoor Toorgash range with real grass and live Toorgas doesn't make it any less a jail."

She shrugged. She'd made him lose his temper, and no matter how attractive it made him look, she was sticking to her blasters. "I don't wish to disagree with you, sir, but we are listed in the Republic charter as a --"

"You could be listed as a Kilassin petting zoo, but that doesn't change what this place really is!" He could see where this was going -- again. Time to change tactics. "Tell me this, then. Is my client free to leave?"

She looked at him, eyes impassive and unforgiving. This one should send him right over the edge, she hoped. "And who is your client?"

To her glee, his face turned the same crimson color as the Supreme Chancellor's guards' new uniforms. Amazingly, he managed to sputter out her name. "Senator . . . Lavina . . . Durada-Vashne . . . Wren."

She knew what to say next. But was she really that evil? Yes, she decided. This one was just too good-looking and too much fun to play with. Besides, it wasn't evil, she corrected herself. It was revenge. Not against this one, per se, but against the horde of ex-boyfriends who'd ruined her credit, forgotten her

birthdays and treated her like . . . like . . . well, like she was treating this poor, obviously defenseless man now.

"And just how do you spell Wren?"

Inside Warlan Tosk, personal security specialist, something snapped. He stopped talking, stood completely upright, smoothed down the lapels of his jacket and smiled thinly. "Will you excuse me? I'll be right back, ma'am." And with that, he slowly walked out of the lobby and into the building's lavish green courtyard, a half-deranged look in his eyes.

She watched him leave with a self-satisfied grin. That was more fun than she'd had in ever so long. What she needed now was another man to break; why stop when you're on a roll? And, as if the universe itself was hers to command, a brawny Zabrak carrying a package from Renna's Transport Service came through the front doors a few moments after Warlan left.

With a silent "thank you" to whatever powers were obviously watching over her, she buzzed him through the security doors and back into the office. This one, maybe she'd flirt with first. It would make torturing him all the more fun.

* * * * *

Outside, Warlan paced between the manicured hedges. Could he have been wrong? He'd been here more than an hour now, and aside from a rancor disguised as a receptionist, he saw nothing dangerous. Maybe Wren was all right after all. Perhaps this move by the Supreme Chancellor really was to get her out of harm's way while things in the Senate heated up. Was he just being paranoid?

No -- it was his *job* to be paranoid. All the signs led up to an attempt on Lavina's life. There was that ugly business with the infiltrator on Cularin last year and then the ship hijacking on their way here to Coruscant. The "accident" in Wren's apartment complex had obviously been a staged event as well. He knew what faulty wiring looked like, and that lift had definitely been tampered with. He'd developed a sixth sense about ambushes and assassinations; it was practically screaming at him now.

And every trail he'd followed led him here. His contact in the Undercity going missing while investigating Senators. The strange shipments coming through customs before disappearing out of quarantine. Everything was pointing to

something violent about to happen and what was worse, it was about to happen to his client.

He was glad he'd insisted on escorting her here a few days ago when the order came down from the Chancellor to have her moved to this safehouse. He used the term loosely, as it felt a lot more like a prison than a protected shelter. The armed guards, the security gate, and the monitor grid should have made him feel better about the Senator's safety, but somehow it didn't. If trouble couldn't get in, that just meant she couldn't get out to escape it.

Frustrated, Warlan started twirling his blaster pistol. It was a nervous habit, one that helped him settle and focus. In truth, he hardly ever drew it with the intention of shooting. He just liked spinning it around his trigger finger. The last time he'd actually pulled it out of hostility was when he was escorting Lavina here and had to warn that swoop driver away. That driver had been just a little too close for his comfort. Crazy pilot, that one, zipping through traffic, but that was just the way Zabrak were. The whole race seemed allergic to holding still, even stocky ones like . . .

He turned toward the front doors and shouted into his wrist comm before his brain even registered why. He'd seen that delivery man before, and Warlan Tosk didn't believe in coincidence.

Five yards from the entrance, the doors exploded outward, and the entire front of the facility blossomed into a fireball. The last thing the beleaguered bodyguard saw before unconsciousness dragged him down was the center of the holding facility collapsing, completely engulfed in flames.

Tilnes

What follows is an excerpt of a research team's report from beneath the surface of Tilnes. The signal, which should have been scrambled and broadcast on a private channel, was disrupted by the electromagnetic pulses so common on Tilnes and further scrambled by the events that followed. The company that seems to have hired the research team, Restimar Mining, has denied having a group on Tilnes (perhaps predictably, since admitting it would mean admitting to violating their trade agreement with Verga Mer Mining Corporation). All the

same, the transmission has a number of individuals concerned about the state of affairs on, and beneath, the moon.

Person: . . . repeat, sensor disruption has been extensive. Communications were temporarily lost, and we believe they have been restored, but we need confirmation. The team is functioning at 60 percent; medical services are required that are out of our hands. Restimar, do you copy?

The holorecorder finally auto-adjusts to the lighting levels, and we see that the speaker is a Human male of middle years, a scar tugging the left corner of his mouth into a perpetual half-frown. The hair on the right side of his head is matted with blood. Behind him, other Human shapes move past, just out of the range within which the holorecorder could focus on their faces.

Scarred Man (sighing): Restimar, this is team 1044, Operation Cracked Crystal. Please respond. Team 1044 requires immediate evacuation --

The signal shudders and breaks up, but instead of going black, a crackling, white-grey snow covers the projection field. It rattles like a bag of chance cubes hung in a windstorm for almost ten seconds. Then the field clears and the scarred man is back, still talking.

Scarred Man: -- is not provided, he will not survive. This is a very real problem, Restimar. Please confirm. Over.

He sits, impatient, staring at something just to one side of the holorecorder. After a few seconds, a figure stumbles into view behind him and begins to lunge toward him.

Voice off-camera: Sir, the droid!

Scarred man turns as the droid -- a modified protocol droid with burnished plates that have begun to crack and corrode -- takes a swing at his head. He ducks, and the droid's fist passes inches from the holorecorder. The droid stares at the recorder.

Droid: Hello! I am --

It pauses and takes another swing at the scarred man, who again ducks.

Droid: -- C4K0, programmed for etiquette and protocol.

It takes another swing at the scarred man, who doesn't quite duck in time and gets clipped atop his head. He tumbles to the ground.

C4K0: It is my regretful duty to inform you that you are in violation of a number of matters of both etiquette and protocol, and that I must therefore ask you to immediately cease and desist all activities beneath Tilnes.

Someone else -- another Human -- runs up behind C4K0 and attempts to tackle the droid and drag him away from the holorecorder. C4K0 nonchalantly brings a fist up beneath the man's jaw, sending him crumpling to the ground.

The screen again goes to grey-white snow, and this time in the background, we can hear other noises. Shouting and banging and a rather disturbing "crunch" all occur before the screen is again clear, and scarred man is seated at the holorecorder. Blood oozes from the area where C4K0 connected.

Scarred Man: The EMPs have damaged the circuitry of everything mechanical. The droids are erratic. Our guide droid seems to have developed an attitude problem --

He ducks another swing, and another Human male rushes across behind him to tackle the rogue droid.

Scarred Man: This makes it even more vital that you get us out of here soon. Restimar, please confirm, or we will be forced to switch to a non-secure channel to broadcast a distress call. We do not, repeat, do not wish to break communication silence in that manner. Operation Cracked Crystal is incomplete, repeat, incomplete. We need more time, but first, we need assistance. Over.

No sooner does he say the word than C4K0 is back again, bantha-rushing him from the left and sending them both to the floor. With the scarred man out of the way, we see that he's sitting in a cavern of some kind, with a low ceiling and rough-hewn walls. A body -- not moving, not breathing -- lies on the ground behind where he'd been seated. Two more bodies -- scarred man and the protocol droid -- roll into view. A woman rushes into view and tries to attach a restraining bolt to the back of the droid's head, but it swats her away, sending the bolt skittering across the floor. As it holds the scarred man down, the droid pivots its head and glares at the woman.

C4K0: I must say, that was particularly rude. Please do not attempt such things again --

It lifts the scarred man up by his collar, then slams him into the stone floor. His head bounces. He moans.

C4K0: -- or I may be forced to take action against you. I would prefer that our working arrangement remain pleasant, and not degenerate --

Another lift, slam, head-bounce.

C4K0: -- into mindless violence. There have been violations of protocol by your tour group, and it is my responsibility to offer a stern rebuke --

He punches scarred man in the mouth, splitting both lips.

C4K0: -- for such violations. Please understand that this is in everyone's best interests, since if we lack etiquette and protocol, we become uncivilized. And no one --

Punch.

C4K0: -- wants to --

Punch, slam.

C4K0: -- be uncivilized, do they?

The woman backs out of the frame, leaving the droid to attend to the scarred man. He's still moaning, bleeding from a half-dozen new wounds on his face, and looks every bit like a man who's had a droid use him for a practice bag which, in reality, he has.

A blue-white blast from an ion gun crackles through the air and envelopes the droid, sending it twitching to the floor. It doesn't seem to be shutting down -- just twitching, more or less uncontrollably. The scarred man pulls himself into a sitting position and attempts to wipe blood from his forehead. He only succeeds in creating a somewhat thinner smear before rising and coming back to the holorecorder.

Scarred Man: Restimar, it is impossible to predict how long our equipment will hold out. We've jury-rigged the transmitter twice already -- although

somebody thought it would be a bad idea to dismantle the droid and use its circuits and gears for the last fix, a decision we now regret.

Thick drops of blood drip from his eyebrow to his cheek.

Scarred Man: Progress report, then, since it's unlikely that our life support will hold out much longer if there are further EMPs. Operation Cracked Crystal is --

C4K0 stands, still twitching, behind the scarred man. Someone off-camera shouts as the protocol droid leaps, both hands slamming into the sides of the scarred man's neck. His eyes go wide for a moment, and then roll back in his head. The droid shoves him aside and sits before the recorder.

C4K0: In matters of etiquette, it is generally accepted that when an individual has committed a social error, we must give him the opportunity to correct this error prior to -- prior to -- prior to -- prior to -- prior to -- prior to offering to correct it for him. If one were to correct the errors made by those around one with relative impunity, one would have little time for other activities. Furthermore, it is often regarded as rude to point out minor breaches of etiquette without giving the person every chance to correct such on his own.

Its left arm straightens and catches an attacker coming in, tossing him idly out of the holorecorder's view.

C4K0: As a tour guide, I am well-versed in the norms of the -- of the -- of the -- of the environment through which I lead my charges. These norms do not now include, nor have they ever included, the taking of souvenirs from the mines. All mineral deposits beneath Tilnes are the sole property of Verga Mer Mining Corporation -- Corporation -- Corporation, and attempted removal of any naturally occurring minerals from Tilnes is both improper and illegal.

Having apparently exhausted all other avenues of attack, someone off-camera throws a rock at C4K0. It bounces off the droid's head, leaving a sizable dent.

C4K0: I say, that is quite rude!

The droid tries to stand and is pelted by more rocks, coming from both sides. It tries to swat the rocks away, but there are too many, and they come too fast. Within seconds, sparks begin to pop in its eyes, and as the dents multiply, the droid simply falls over. As it falls, a bloody hand reaches up from beneath the recorder's view, and the scarred man pulls himself back into a sitting position.

Scarred Man: Restimar, Operation Cracked Crystal requires extraction. Another EMP and we will lose transmission capability. Status report as fol --

Another crackle-burst of energy, and the grey-white snow follows. This time, though, there is silence over the snow. Slowly, the grey-white fades to black. The signal is gone.

Sith Battlelords

The following is an excerpt from a personal log on one of Cularin's many holonet nodes. It is unclear who the original author was, or who the slicer might have been that obtained the logfile. The contents are disturbing enough that the mainstream media is refusing to even discuss it, lest it further fuel the delusions of the Believers. All the same, the file has been making the rounds of some of the conspiracy-focused nodes, drawing no small amount of concerned reaction from many who read it.

Everyone wonders about that Sith fortress on Almas. I mean, it's not the kind of thing you can ignore, with the big black spire rising out of the desert. It's older than almost anything in Cularin, I guess. And it's a scary place. I've been there a couple of times, helping the Jedi out. It's scary in a way nothing I've ever seen is scary. It's wrong in a way I never imagined anything could be wrong.

I always wondered why anybody would build that kind of place. I mean, it's way away from everything else, it's out in the desert, it had to be terraformed just to be livable -- and I read that thing that was supposedly written by Darth Rivan about why he came to Cularin. But that doesn't explain why he'd build a fortress that shoots huge lightning at passing starships. And I'm not the kind of person who believes in the whole "mad, evil genius" mentality. You don't get to be a Sith Lord, I bet, by just doing whatever you want. Everything you do has to have a purpose. There was a reason Darth Rivan came to Cularin, and there's a reason he built that fortress where and how he did.

I think I may have figured it out. I mean, I got hold of a file. I'm not going to post it here, since it was something I horked off a Jedi's datapad. I don't want anyone tracing it back to him (or her -- I'm not telling). It laid out this scary

ritual thing that would explain a lot about why we got a place like this here, and why Rivan would have wanted it to start with.

He wanted to use it to make Sith battlelords.

If you never heard of them, you aren't the only one. From what I can tell, it's not like these guys ever made it into wide circulation. If they had . . . well, the battles the Sith lost? They might have won.

The basic idea of Sith battlelords goes back to the problem the Sith always had that made them adopt that "rule of two" thing. Namely, if you get too many evil guys in the same place, they're gonna kill each other. Evil doesn't work well together. Darksiders can't organize, because they're always afraid everyone else is going to stab them in the back -- literally. With a lightsaber. These kind of people aren't likely to work together, and nobody's sure gonna want to work for them.

So to take care of this problem, I guess Rivan designed these battlelords. The basic idea was to eliminate insubordination as an option for soldiers and make it difficult for someone who's in charge of soldiers to mistreat them. Kind of a forced morale thing. It was a pretty convoluted process, and he needed someplace special to do all the work -- like a fortress in the middle of nowhere that he could use to test things out and refine the technique.

A battlelord, as near as I can tell, is like a commanding officer with big ugly teeth and a leash that connects him to all his soldiers. Except nobody can see the leash and the teeth. They're partly metaphorical, depending on the species of the battlelord.

This isn't making sense. Let me outline the process for you.

There's a long, drawn-out ritual. All sorts of Sith "magic" is involved, and I don't want to know exactly what happens. But at the end, the person who's supposed to become a battlelord is laid down and cut open. Then he bleeds, and while he's bleeding, his troops pass by and track through his blood. (I guess there could have been female battlelords, too. I never thought about it.) Somehow, with everything that's gone on, this bonds them to the commander. Then some more dark side badness gets done, and if the commander survives, when he stands up again, he's a battlelord and is connected to his troops.

That means they can't leave him. They can't get more than five kilometers away from him (this part was kind of vague, but what was being described made it sound like about five km), or they'll fall into this wracking pain and eventually just die. They can't take action against their battlelord, or they have the same problem. Wracking pain, followed by death. So what you've got is a bunch of troops who don't have any choice but to be loyal.

Here's the best part, though. You'd think that they'd just want to kill the battlelord, right?

They can't! If they try to kill the battlelord, and if they actually manage to hurt him -- if they manage to draw blood -- the damage doesn't affect him. Instead, it affects one of them, one of the troops who are bonded to him. As long as they're close enough for him to see them, any time he gets hurt, he can make it hurt any of his troops instead. So the troops sure aren't going to try to kill him, and they're going to do everything in their power to keep him safe. Because for him to die, they either all have to be dead first, or they have to be nowhere around him.

That's why Rivan built the fortress. He needed a lab. A place with enough dark side energy to create these monstrosities to lead his armies.

I guess he didn't succeed, which is a good thing. Because I really wouldn't want a bunch of these battlelords running around. We have enough trouble killing the things that die when you stick a lightsaber through them. We don't need to deal with things that might not –

Hearts of Green and Gold

For many on Cularin, the coming of the Clone Wars is the harbinger of a conflict beyond their imaginings. For others, it is almost a sense of peace, of closure. The Tarasin, long the keepers of wisdom and ancient lore on their verdant planet, can sense the Force in a profound way. Through that connection to all life, they have known for millennia the intricate ebb and flow of the powers that nurture all things. The reptilian warders of Cularin have long understood the path their lives have led, generation after generation, as the keeper of all life on their world.

They have lived in pursuit of their purpose, their reason for being. And now, at last, their day of reckoning is at hand . . .

The tension in the glade was so thick, even the youngest of the assembly could tell their elders were upset. This was the largest gathering of irstat leaders in remembered history, and as harsh words and dangerous displays of irritation continued to escalate, everyone present became repeatedly reminded why such a conclave were never called before.

A select few in the assembly knew that this was not entirely true. A few months before, most of these elders were present for a secret ritual cast on behalf of Mother Darianna of the Hiironi tribe. Her wisdom was never questioned before, and when she called out for support from the other irstats, none of their leaders could refuse her request. So well loved and revered was she, the eldest of the Tarasin race, that her word was all even warring leaders needed to set aside their feuds and come together in peace.

Unfortunately, things changed since then. Since the Great Ritual was invoked, numerous powerful Tarasin were missing or killed. Since the Great Ritual, more than two hundred kilometers of forest around the twin cities of Gadrin and Hedrett were burned in an "industrial" accident. Since then, hundreds of Humans with armor and weapons descended from the sky from their huge starships to "secure" their world.

Even those tribes most closely allied with the Hiironi were upset with Mother Darianna over these changes. Those already opposed to her were outright furious. Even a pouchling could see that the fury present at this meeting marked it as less of the ritual gathering she called for and more like a war council.

"Age has not made you wiser. It has driven you insane." The speaker elicited a score of flaring crests and darkening body colors around him, but even that reaction was very telling of the assembly's mood. The Tarasin changed colors to show emotion, and from the shades of the figures around Father Tiirtha, there was surprise at his insolence but no real disagreement.

As always, Mother Darianna remained impassive and did not betray even the slightest shift in her hue. The long years might have dulled her scales and her eyesight, but her skills at diplomacy were as razor honed as ever. "Please," she said in a polite voice, "go on."

Even Tiirtha had expected more of a response, more of a rise to his verbal challenge. Taken aback, he paused just long enough for her to speak again without breaking the unspoken rules of decorum that defined a tribal meeting.

"I only ask what everyone here, including yourself, agreed to last year when we stood in conclave on this very spot. Is it madness to expect you to keep your word?"

That move he *had* expected. Indeed, he and the others here in support of his tribe had rehearsed their response to perfection. As their chosen speaker, he was ready with his answer. "We agreed to come back and finish what we started for the good of Cularin. But look around you, Great Mother. Our world is at its weakest, and you ask us to weaken our people even more. We agreed to protect all life, but look at what the lives outside our green planet have done to us."

She watched him gesture toward the stars, just as she knew he would. She watched the colors shift on the people assembled in the grove, just as she knew they would. This entire debate and the hostilities that might come of it were all foreseen long ago. When she agreed to walk this path, she always knew that it would lead here, to the moment that would make or break her entire race.

One misstep and war would break out between the tribes. Not another border dispute that left a handful dead and hundreds more swearing a scale-feud, but outright war embroiling every irstat and private hold across Cularin. War was in the air, in the very song of the universe, and even the Tarasin could not escape its violent, siren call.

That is to say, they could not escape it without help. The human Lanius had pledged his support, his very life if it came to that, to protect her world. It was time for her to do the same. This was the pact she formed with the dark one that had come on Lanius' behalf; now she had to honor her words.

Over the din of angry hisses and the scintillating display of furious hues, Darianna said the one thing that would make her collected people all fall silent. She spoke the only four words that could quiet even her most vicious opponents.

"I will step down."

Somewhere, hundreds of yards away, a single leaf fell from a branch and landed on the lush undergrowth. Everyone in the grove could hear it; the silence was like a tomb. Remembering his wits eventually, Tiirtha was the first to speak. Even with his ambitions and his drive for power, his first words were only those of shock. "You will step down?"

She nodded gravely knowing how many of her race present wanted nothing more than for her to move aside and let someone more aggressive adopt her place. She prayed the wisdom of the Jedi Human was right. If Qel-Bertuk was wrong, her people would march on the alien settlements by sunrise.

"Yes, I will step down, but I ask for two things. Allow me to remain long enough to see the Great Rite finished with the closing of this year."

The whispers and hissing began again, but her shocking announcement still had most of those present too dumbfounded to speak at all. Tiirtha saw his opportunity to emerge as a strong and wise leader. Speaking above the throng, he made the decision she counted on. "Done, Revered Mother. It is wrong of us to deny you your final wish." Those who knew him best could tell just how much he relished the word "final."

"Secondly, I ask that you follow my leadership unquestioningly until that time ends. We need to be a united people until the turn of the year and I hand my seat over to Father Tiirtha."

A second leaf, even farther away, fluttered to the ground. Again, everyone heard it. In more decades than any of them cared to count, Mother Darianna had never appointed a successor. While she was technically only the Mother of a single irstat, her power and wisdom made her a sort of unofficial guide for the entire race. Technically, she had no seat to give up, but everyone accepted that she had one and that she had just declared who would fill it when she was done.

Everyone in the clearing was stunned, especially Tiirtha himself. He was, again, the first to recover. His ambitions were always known to Darianna, but she also saw within him the potential to be a great leader. He was too ambitious and even impetuous, but in his heart, she knew him to be a compassionate Father with the interests of the Tarasin as his first priority. Thus, she was a little saddened to have to use him like this.

"The Revered Mother has spoken. Are there any here that would deny her?"

And that was the moment of truth. If even a single voice spoke against Tiirtha in this instant, it would all come crashing down. Darianna listened, each passing heartbeat an eternity that thundered in her aged chest. After a full minute of silence passed, she dared to breathe again.

"Then your requests are heard and granted, Wise One. We, your people, are yours to command until the last day of the last Moon of Reaping." Intent on leading by example, Tiirtha did something even she had not foreseen. He folded his proud crests and kneeled. "What would you have of us?"

Like a wave of green and gold, the colors of respect and acceptance, the Tarasin before her all followed suit. If the years had not long ago dried out her eyes, she would have wept. Instead, she bowed in return and gestured for them to rise. "I only ask for now that my last days with you be ones of peace. Please, my brothers and sisters, drop your weapons and join with me in ritual."

The sound of spear and knives and rifles falling to the grass was utterly deafening. In all her life, Darianna never heard anything so beautiful.

The Believers

The following is an excerpt from a holonet documentary produced by a group calling itself "Truth For Cularin" -- TFC, for short. TFC is producing a number of pieces detailing trouble within the Cularin system and offering speculation (often wild and unfounded) on why the trouble might have arisen and what could have been done about it. Their first subject, the group calling itself "The Believers," has been a problem in Cularin for some time but has been largely ignored throughout the remainder of the galaxy because of the ongoing war. While Believer activity has varied in intensity over recent years (with their training facility in the Sith fortress beneath Almas exposed, many Believers went into hiding), their continued presence in Cularin disturbs many citizens.

Other citizens are becoming increasingly concerned about TFC. Both their motives and their methods have been called into question on more than one occasion . . .

The man sits behind a plain-looking desk, its sides and face durasteel, its surface apparently clear, but so stacked with documents and datachips as to be nearly invisible. To call the man "ordinary" would be to overstate things, if only just. He has a weak chin, thinning black hair, and eyes that seem ready to disappear into their sockets at any moment. It's not that he looks ordinary, but

that he's very much the kind of individual no one would look at twice on the street. This makes it all the more remarkable that he's on a prime-hour holonet broadcast looking as smug as a panthac in a nerf-pen.

"People of Cularin, my name is Jarik Vuintor. I represent a citizens' rights group known as Truth for Cularin. We in the TFC believe that it's long past time for someone to be telling the truth about what's gone on in recent years -- a truth, we suggest, that has been purposefully and maliciously hidden from the people of Cularin by our so-called government. They would have us believe that if such occurred, it would be in our best interests. The TFC would suggest otherwise. We would suggest that it is in everyone's best interests to have an informed constituency that understands the nature of the threats present in and around its home system. With that in mind, we must turn our watchful eye to the group calling itself 'The Believers' and ask two questions. Who are they, and what do they want?"

He pivots in his chair, turning to face another recording device. A window behind him shows the sprawling jungles of Cularin. For a moment, the window flickers, the jungle disappearing and then reappearing in the blink of an eye.

"The story we've been told about these Believers is that they are Sith worshippers. There is not a time since the ancient battles between the Jedi and the Sith that such individuals were as active as we've seen in Cularin in recent years. Are they Sith cultists, or are they something else?"

"If reports are to be believed, the Believers attempted to set up a base of operations in the Sith fortress on Almas, have made numerous attempts on the lives of citizens and dignitaries throughout Cularin, and have variously attempted to undermine major portions of Cularin's industrial centers. But to what end? What have the Believers been, other than a nuisance, beside the threat posed by Thaere? Do they even rate as a threat on the same scale as the Metatheran Cartel? At first blush, the answer seems to be no. For all their attempts at bringing people to their cause, they seem to have been thwarted at every turn, and of late, have been hunted down like the vermin they are.

"But things are rarely as simple as they seem."

He rotates in his chair again, resting his elbows on his desk. He looks very intense -- in an "I want to look very intense so I shall furrow my brows" kind of way.

"The fact of the matter is, the Believers are too numerous, and apparently too well-funded, to have been the loose collection of misfits and malcontents many seem content to dismiss them as being. How does one move a small army onto a planet occupied by a Jedi Academy, without the Jedi noticing? Into a Sith fortress that was, we are supposed to believe, guarded by Jedi at the time? How does a group of 'insane cultists' -- to borrow a phrase from a recent holonet report on Believer activity -- manage to gain access to some of the most secure platform cities of Genarius? There are too many questions that cannot be answered if we dismiss the Believers as lunatics, so we must consider them a real threat. We must further consider where, precisely, they may have gotten their funding.

"They are, as near as the TFC can tell, very intent in a narrow set of beliefs. They have long believed in the inevitable victory of the Sith over the Jedi, in the domination of the so-called 'light side' of the Force by the 'dark side.' Those of us who are part of the TFC certainly respect those who believe in the Force, but we recognize that the theological implications of this energy field are less important than the political ramifications of power shifts in the governance structure on Coruscant.

"What role might the Believers be playing in these power shifts? We've seen minimal evidence of interest in Cularin on the part of the Galactic Senate; could the Believers be part of the reason? We don't know. Nobody outside Coruscant does, we suspect.

"Let us assume, though, that the Believers actually do believe in -- worship, revere, whatever word you'd like to use -- the power of the Sith. Let us further assume that they are trying to access some of that power here in Cularin, first in the deserts of Almas and later throughout the system. We must ask ourselves to what end they have made these efforts. What is it that they are trying to accomplish? Why would they bother tormenting all of Cularin, if their enemy is only the Jedi?"

Again, he pivots. The window is behind him once more, but is curiously blank for a full two seconds before the image of Cularin's jungle appears. He steeples his fingers in front of his chin.

"The fundamental assumption, we believe, is wrong. What if, instead of being the enemy of the Jedi, the Believers are actually an arm of the Jedi? What if this is how those 'noble warriors,' those 'guardians of peace and justice' --"

He emphasizes these words with gestures indicating quotation marks.

"— rid themselves of those who are simply not cut out for the life of a Jedi? What if this is the final evidence of the lack of ability of the Almas faculty to train Jedi in the ways of the Force? There has been *no* activity on this scale anywhere else. Only here, in Cularin. We think it's time for the truth. We think it's time for the Jedi to own up to what they've done.

"Think about it, Cularin. The truth of the Jedi's involvement explains a great deal. How the Believers came to be, why they were able to infiltrate Almas, why they were able to do so very many things. If you had the 'protectors of the galaxy' on your side, you could do all those things, and more.

"Or maybe the problem goes even higher. Who stands to benefit from Believer activity? Whose career path may be enhanced by recent Believer uprisings? This is where the Jedi theory starts to fall apart. With things as they currently stand in Cularin, it's difficult to believe -- no pun intended, of course -- that the Jedi are wholly responsible. If the Believers were, in fact, Jedi castoffs, they've long since outgrown the capacity of the Jedi to control.

"Who, then? And who could possibly be funding the Believers?

"Not the criminals. The Believers may have worked along similar lines as some of our criminal organizations, but the TFC cannot believe that a criminal group would fund a group composed of the mentally unstable castoffs from the Jedi Academy. Where's the motivation? Answer: There is none. Which means the funding comes from somewhere else -- from someone who stands to benefit from the attention the Believers bring to Cularin.

"Enter Lavina Wren. Senator. Social climber. Politician.

"It's pretty clear that politicians aren't to be trusted. Politicians from backwater worlds with no real power and minimal representation are to be trusted least of all. Look at the trouble small systems have caused! And now we have Senator Wren, whose system is besieged on all sides, looking for support from the Senate.

"We've seen this ploy before, people! Look around! Read the holonets! The fact of the matter is, when modern politicians want to rise in stature, to gain power, they put innocent lives at risk. That's nothing new; it's been done for generations!

"What we have, then, is a massive conspiracy. The Believers are a creation of the Jedi and Senator Wren, brought about to sow havoc in Cularin. That creation, we suggest, has gotten out of control. We must hold those responsible accountable for what they have done.

"And that, friends, is the truth for Cularin."

He smiles -- a plain, self-satisfied smirk -- and the scene fades.

Dark Soul

They were flying into a trap. He could see the trap, see its jaws closing in the form of two wedges of red blips on the *Maelstrom*'s primary combat display. Each small blip was a droid fighter. Each large blip was a cruiser or gunship. There were entirely too many of both kinds on the display, and their positions were such that if his advance was detected, it would take them no effort at all to reverse direction and snap the trap closed on his entire fleet.

With fortune, his ships had entered the system undetected and could pass straight through the open gap in the planet's defenses without engaging the droid fleet. However, if the last few months had taught General Jeht anything, it was that luck was a commodity he'd been lacking for quite some time. In the absence of fate's favor, he would have to rely on himself and on the Force.

Thinking quickly, he waved his hand over the communications control. A hologram of a clone pilot officer appeared before him. "Your orders, General?"

"I want the lead gunship to open its reactor baffles on my mark to simulate the energy readout of the *Maelstrom* and fly ahead with every other ship in the fleet. My ship will come to a full stop and double up on stealth and passive shields."

It was a gamble, and from the body language of the clone as he hastened to obey his new commands, Jeht could tell he knew it. He was gambling on them having already been betrayed -- a very cynical way of looking at the universe, but these days, it was right more often than not.

In any case, the ruse was a simple one that would only work if the planetary defenders already knew about their approach and were not using active long-

range scans. It also banked on the few known weaknesses of droids versus living pilots. Droids used sensors exclusively as opposed to "seeing" anything. Thus, a ship could pass itself off as a different vessel just by duplicating the few things a droid ship used as detection criteria. Having his gunship radiate the energy patterns of the *Maelstrom* was a trick that would never fool a sentient crew, but against droids, it actually stood a chance.

Darrus's command ship came to a full stop as the rest of the fleet traveled ahead through the avenue of optimal approach. He waited tensely as the ships reached the halfway point, the logically perfect point for the trap to be sprung . . . assuming there was one at all. For a fleeting moment, he allowed himself the hope that he'd been wrong.

Emergency alarms flashed all over the *Maelstrom*'s tracking systems as both wings of the droid armada changed course rapidly. The impassive metal tide crashed into his fleet on both sides, cutting them off and boring destructively into its numbers with a thousand lances of light. Before Jeht could shout his next order, ten percent of his ships were vaporized in blinding flashes of fire and incandescent steel.

It was a necessary sacrifice, he told himself, as the *Maelstrom* banked a hard right and approached the planet at an oblique angle. The trap's closure left the world of Kromus completely undefended on both flanks. Since his mission was a simple one -- orbital bombardment of a remote research and construction facility -- he wouldn't need much time to complete it. His fleet, even now fighting for their lives against a vastly numerically superior force, was buying him every second they could. He had to trust in the Force that it would be enough.

The *Maelstrom* came into orbit roughly, jarring everyone aboard as the ionosphere's interference shook the vessel. Rather than chastising his flight crew, he was grateful for the haste. A few bruises were acceptable; letting this planet's construction of a Separatist superweapon continue was not. He'd seen the projected capabilities of the weapon, codenamed Starkiller, and if he had to crash this ship into the planet to keep it from ever being used, he would. The alternative was . . . unthinkable.

"Sir, target is in range of the main battery."

"Excellent," he said, picking himself back up into the command chair. "Prepare to --"

"Sir, there's something you should see." His sensor operator touched a control, and across the ship's main screen, an orbital image of the facility flickered into visibility. It was all there, just as it had been described during his briefing on Coruscant, but something was wrong. The installation's silhouette was wrong. There was just too much of it. Could the plant be bigger than the Republic's spies had reported?

"Give me a better visual. Our cover's already blown, so go active if you have to, soldier."

"Right away, sir!" The image magnified and cleared up considerably, zooming in to reveal a six-winged research station with a massive docking bay at its heart. There, cradled and swaddled in scaffolding, was the goal of their mission -- the Starkiller. It looked nearly complete; only a few missing sections of paneling betrayed its unfinished status. It was likely already loaded with its deadly payload and would be ready for launch within days, if not sooner.

All of that, he'd expected to see, but it was what laid nestled between the long arms of the facility that made his heart stop. Surrounding the facility, a sprawling city filled the entire image. A lifeform counter showed more than two million sentients. The Separatist military had built their facility directly on top of what appeared to be the largest city on the planet. Republic intelligence on this world had indicated a sparse population of pre-sentient beings; apparently, the census had been incorrect.

"Commander, I need a scan of the planet's surface. Give me a lifeform total and try to find a place for us to land. We'll have to take that ship out with a ground operation."

The deck officer snapped to a salute and started barking orders. Within moments, each one bought at the expense of another ship in Jeht's fleet, his first request had been processed and granted.

"Sensors indicate a planetary population of 1.3 billion, sir, with thousands of dominant animal and plant species. Our records of this world actually match Kromol, the fifth planet in this system. There seems to have been a clerical error, sir."

Jeht scoffed. "A clerical error? I'll say!" He looked at his chair's readouts, watching the nearby space battle. His ships were fighting valiantly, but

numbers were starting to wear them down. "How's that drop zone coming? We need to land quickly!"

Before the commander could answer, one of the bridge crew interjected. "Sir! The target designate is showing a power spike. Its systems are coming online."

"What?" He leapt out of his chair and ran across the bridge to look at the readout himself, even though he knew the clone's report to be true. The Force was screaming in his mind, warning of an impending danger so immense, there might be no escape if he did not act *now*.

There was no time to land, no time to take the Starkiller out with a ground assault. His fleet was getting sliced to ribbons, and if the superweapon was allowed to launch, it would leap into hyperspace and escape. That would cost hundreds of billions of lives; he could feel the ramifications stretching out before him. The Starkiller had to be destroyed, and it had to be destroyed at this moment. There would never be another chance.

"Commander, open fire on the facility. Every gun, maximum power."

For their part, the clones did not hesitate. The order was relayed and carried out within the space of a single second. General Jeht could feel the decks of the *Maelstrom* vibrate as volley after glowing volley tore through the atmosphere. The Starkiller, the research facility, and more than two million lives disappeared in a fireblossom of purifying light. The world itself shook, clouds of vapor and debris swirling for hundreds of miles around the impact site.

Darrus closed his eyes, trying to shut his mind off from the screams of the Force, the echo of so much death and shock. Strangely, it was not as hard to silence the terror in his thoughts as he'd feared. It was as if some part of him, the part that felt the horror of what he had done, was going numb.

"Sir." He realized suddenly that the deck officer had been trying to get his attention for more than a minute.

"Yes . . . yes, Commander?"

"Half the droid fleet has gone out of control. The rest is in full retreat. Shall I order the pursuit?"

Jeht shook his head. "No. Recall our ships and form them up on our wings. We've done what we came here to do. I want us underway back to Coruscant as fast as possible." And with that order, the soul-weary Jedi left the bridge with every intention of returning to his quarters and being quietly ill.

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In a dark chamber lit only by a pair of blood-red sconces, a robed figure listened impatiently to news he already knew.

"The world is almost uninhabitable, my lord. The loss of the hyper-point destabilizer and its delivery vehicle has caused a thermal shift in the planet's atmosphere and tectonic instabilities that may yet tear Kromus apart. We are continuing to monitor the world as you instructed, but it is increasingly difficult to remain in orbit."

The cowed shadow nodded, feigning disinterest and omniscience while silently plotting. "Yes, yes. Remain until the last possible second and then proceed to Count Dooku with your findings. The data may prove useful for another weapon project."

"Yes, my lord. We live to serve."

That elicited a wry chuckle as the hidden figure terminated the transmission. "Of course you do. For a while longer, at least."

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In the commons of the Crosstown Bar on Cularin, the assembled patrons fell silent as a wartime update broadcast came over the tavern's Holonet projector. It was one of the few times the Crosstown could be called quiet, but as the Clone Wars had grown more violent, information had become too important for anyone to miss.

"The Senate has issued a statement of remorse and regret over the destruction of all life on Kromus, the fourth world in the Kro'eval system on the border of Separatist-occupied space. While the Republic Army maintains that the strike was an unfortunate necessity to prevent illegal weapons development, Separatist sources continue to deny such activity and are calling the incident a 'scouring' and an 'act of murder over a billion fold'."

"In the wake of these allegations, four more systems have sided with the Separatists as part of a growing protest movement over the increasingly violent nature of military actions taken by the Army of the Republic and its Jedi leaders. Separatist bounties on notable Jedi commanders and Council members have been doubled as a sign of the Separatists' increased resolve to combat what Count Dooku has been quoted as calling the Jedi Council's 'terrorist regime.' The Council has once again declined to comment."

Remember When

The cantina door slid open, allowing the greenish glow of a fading radiation storm to wash over the few meters of floor not covered by tables or chairs. The light illuminated in strange alien relief boot prints in all shapes and sizes that tracked through the permanent layer of dust that was as much a part of Krakin's Alehouse as the ale itself. A shape stood, silhouetted in the doorway, for a long moment. Thick-bodied and tall, the Wookiee seemed to be surveying the alehouse, trying to decide if it was worth his time to step across the threshold. Then he did, and the door slid shut, and the green glow faded into the pale yellow mist of cantina atmosphere.

It took a few seconds for your eyes to readjust, but you didn't need to see particularly well to be able to pick out the Wookiee. His long, slow strides carried him between small round tables where patrons hurried to scoot durasteel chairs out of his way, scraping them through the dust and against the floor with a not-quite-painful keening of metal on metal. He made his way to the bar, sat down, and promptly blended into the haze of smoke and noise that was the Alehouse on that night.

Another Wookiee in a system populated, it seemed, by every species of the galaxy. Another face -- a hairy face, but a face all the same -- in a sea of faces that had somehow made their way to Cularin. Another face in the pond of faces that found themselves drinking this evening in a cantina built by an individual who might have been a Rodian or a Zabrak. Or a Sullustan -- some folks said Krakin had been a Sullustan, but most everyone who heard that just shook their heads. It didn't matter, really, what Krakin was. The cantina that bore his name had been run by a lisping Trandoshan with the unfortunate name "Sossk" for the past fifteen years, and it didn't seem like Sossk planned on going anywhere any time soon. He liked the dust, the pale yellow mist, the low murmur of conversation blended with cheap music piped in through

speakers that had probably been old and used when Krakin installed them. He seemed to like having people around, though he didn't show it through his smiles. He never smiled, just wandered the bar, one thick hand in the pocket of his apron, serving drinks when he felt the urge, stopping to talk whenever someone looked particularly uninterested in talking.

You'd been watching, listening, for a while, when a conversation caught your ear. It wasn't that the individuals were speaking loudly. Quite the contrary -- what attracted your attention was the fact that they seemed to be trying to speak softly, but were so well and truly inebriated that their notion of "quiet" had become distorted. Still not loud, but just loud enough to be heard with relative clarity while avoiding overt notice. But you noticed, because the content of their conversation was something that had been on your mind as well.

"S'not like he was really a bad type." A tired, slurred voice, with hints of Corellian. "I mean, yeah, he once had my commanding officer strung up and used as a practice dummy for blade drills, but the guy -- he deserved it, right? Went and sold off some cargo to the Velkurs. Bloody stupid, that."

"No doubt, yeah." A higher voice. Female? Gritty and a little angry. "It's not like everyone wasn't warned. You do what you're told, and you'll advance. And you did. He didn't lie about that."

"About anything." A third voice. Deeper, slower. Somewhere between thoughtful and unconscious. "I remember your commander. Blak, yes?"

"Yup. S'the one." The slurred voice came with a muffled echo; someone was speaking into a near-empty mug.

"And he was warned," the deep voice said. "We were all warned. Disloyalty results in death. Betrayal results in death. You never had to wonder," he sighed, "never wondered at all. Where you stood. You knew."

"You lied to him, you died. Didn't matter why." The gritty female -- the more you listened, the more you detected hints of Ryl in the twang of her speech, though you weren't particularly inclined to turn and look to verify -- grunted and swore. "But at least you knew it was coming."

"Like those two -- what were their names?" The words ran together in a jumble of sounds that would have been lost on you entirely, had the music not chosen

that moment for a pause. "They were your cousins, right?"

She snorted. "They were Twi'leks. I can't claim them. I wouldn't. They deserved what happened to them. Harboring the Cell."

"S'not like he even gave 'em a chance. Just had the droids blast away. You know what I heard?" He snorted. "I heard when the droids were done, there was nothing left but their boots. Just blasted 'em right out of existence."

The deep voice spoke. "He was cruel. But fair, in his way. And whatever else may be said about him, he kept his word. Never broke it. He expected too much, to think that others might live up to his standard, but it was the only standard he knew. Things were much better with him in charge. Much."

For a few seconds, the music swelled, and you heard the sound of mugs clinking together, then settling, empty, back to the tabletop. By the time the music fell back into its discordant drone, the trio seemed to have already picked up the thread of their conversation.

"-- is unpredictable. Everything is maneuvering. Nobody knows where anybody else stands." She grunted and swore in a language you didn't quite recognize, a dialect of a dialect that came close to Dosh. Close, but not quite. "You look at who's left and you have to think, how are we gonna make it? I mean, the next thing you know, we're all gonna get turned against each other. The last of us who were loyal to Nirama are going to end up wiping each other out."

"S'not going to happen." The words, still slurred, at least came out forcefully. "We got too much history. You remember when he told us we were gonna help in the war? 'Your duty is to me,' he says. 'You swore the oaths.' I remember, 'cause I found the recording. Powerful. Anyway, what came next? Oh yeah. 'You swore the oaths. But there are greater oaths and more powerful loyalties. Cularin is our home, and we will defend our home. Not because it is the right thing to do for business, or the right thing to do for us, but because it is the right thing to do. I will not rest until Cularin is free.' Most of us, we didn't care about free Cularin. But he made me care." His voice trembled. "Never going to be another like him."

The noise of the cantina rose for a few moments, the door hissing open to allow shouts from a streetside fight to amble in and attract some small attention. Then the door again shut out the world.

"In one move," the deep voice said, "everything that we worked for was taken from us. No, not the credits. I have as much now as I ever did with him. More, perhaps. I don't know how many of us appreciated what he really gave us."

"Security?" Her voice held its edge like a well-honed knife. "I don't think so. Always on the run. Good benefits. Great medical plan, yeah."

"Not at all what I'm talking about. He gave us identity. Look at who we are. Just the three of us. Could we be more different from one another? We are the lost spirits of the galaxy, caught in the pull of whatever body is nearest us until we slingshot around and drift somewhere new. He changed that. He offered us identity. Not the kind of identity you get working for a Hutt, either. For a while, it wasn't even like we were criminals. I always knew we were, but there was a part of me that felt . . . free. As if even though we violated every trade charter that existed in Cularin, even though we peddled wares that should never have been sold to anyone, we were providing a service. We were part of Cularin. This is why, when he asked me to fight for Cularin, I did."

"S'why we all did." A hiccough. "Now it's like, we got nothing. Nobody likes the new boss, and he don't like Cularin. It's all business, and he doesn't care who gets hurt. S'all credits to him. I don't know any more where I stand. I was kinda proud to work for Nirama. Showed integrity. Of a kind. I guess."

"Identity." The female voice lost a little of its edge. "You think too much about what it means. Too deep. I don't come drink for deep conversation. I drink to forget deep things, to remember the good. You remember when he sent half the fleet out to run the Thaereian blockade? Now that was entertaining . . ."

Yara: The Unauthorized Biography

The man sits in the center of a soundstage, wrapped in the flowing arms of a tall, white chair. A screen the color of early evening sky curves around him, lit by pale bulbs at the ceiling level. A shaft of pale light streams down on him. He smiles, and the smile has an edge to it. He isn't what you would consider a pleasant individual, in terms of his looks. His hair, somehow both slicked and stiff, is plastered in perfect furrowed rows toward the back of his head. His eyebrows are perpetually raised, as if whoever did his hair tugged too hard while applying the product and slid his forehead a centimeter too high. His eyes are the color of mynock flesh and about as appealing. He speaks.

Man: She has been a voice of reason during troubled times, a campaigner for Cularin's downtrodden. She has visited with crimelords and heads of state, with Jedi and with followers of the Sith. She has brought to Cularin a vision, her vision, of what it is the people of Cularin deserve to know. And she has done it with a complete lack of any sense of herself, or what is proper for one in her role. Good evening. I am Armistice Gluuc-Brendlheim, and I can be speaking of none other than Yara Grugara. Tonight, we will be speaking a great deal of Yara. I will share with you elements of her past that you might not have been aware of, facts about the woman that might cause you to think twice about whether she should now be, or should have ever been, one of Cularin's voices in the galaxy.

The screen behind Armistice shifts, and we see an image of Yara. It's an old image of a very young woman, with short red hair and freckled cheeks. She smiles self-consciously. The image zooms out, and we can see that Yara is dressed in a form-fitting mini-dress, holding what appears to be a double-dip Outer Rim rumdrop.

Armistice (voice-over): For her entire life, Yara Grugara has had a single love -- holorecorders. If anyone within a half-kilometer had a recording device and even the slightest intention of using it, Yara would get herself within range of the viewfinder. It's a talent she's always had, even when she was underage, even when she was engaging in behaviors not at all suitable for a young woman with her eye on a professional career.

The image shifts and we see Yara stumbling along a street. She's older, at least by a couple of years. Her hair is longer, and she's wearing make-up to hide her freckles. She's holding onto the arm of an older gentleman and laughing a slightly tipsy laugh.

Armistice (VO): The man in this film is Ren Voilis. Voilis was a producer for a variety of shows that aired on Cularin Central Broadcasting, including the one that gave Yara her start, "Eye on Cularin." This video was taken one week prior to Yara's first contract with Cularin Central Broadcasting.

As if on-cue, Yara stumbles into Voilis, sending him reeling into a wall. They stand for a long moment, leaning on one another. Then the would-be reporter stretches up and kisses her future producer full on the lips. The clip ends, and we are back to Armistice, who has folded his hands in his lap and is looking more than a little smug.

Armistice: Not the Yara you know and love? My friends, I have to tell you -- the Yara you know has never, ever, been the real Yara. I don't think even Yara knows who Yara is, any more. But we know who she's been. Oh, we know, and in our new three-hour documentary, "Yara Grugara: Unauthorized and Totally Real," we will share it all with you. Here are a few of the highlights.

The screen lights up once more, and we see Yara on set. She's screaming about something, from the expression and color of her face, but what she's screaming about, we can't say. She flails at a production assistant, brandishing a pink designer jacket made from nerf-hides as if it were a lightsaber. She catches him along the side of his head with the jacket, sending him sprawling against a camera, which falls over, which knocks out a wall of her set. Yara storms off the set.

Armistice (VO): Temper tantrums? Yara's had more than her share. It's widely known within the industry that she is one of the most immature, spiteful creatures to ever step in front of a holorecorder.

Yara pours a steaming brown beverage in the lap of a guest on her show. Yara, red-faced, stands up and kicks another guest in the knee. Yara, her face even redder than her hair, advances on a cameraman and throws his camera to the ground. We see two sets of feet -- one in workboots, the other in heels -- run past the fallen camera, then back again.

Armistice (VO): Hard to deal with? Try "impossible." The spoiled brat of the network, Yara was relegated to fashion and society. Her producers -- the ones with whom she'd never had any kind of relationship, of course -- decided that if she were intent on making a fool out of herself, she would be allowed to do so in the forum that would be most permanently damaging to her career. Outbursts like those she demonstrated her first few months on the job would lead her to ostracism and permanent unemployment.

Yara storms out of an office. The name on the door has been blurred (a caption reads: "To protect the innocent, some information has been excised from this promotional recording; the full recording, which may be purchased at [holonet node], is complete and unblurred"), but the Cularin Central Broadcasting logo has not. The sound kicks in and we hear Yara for the first time. "You think this is going to stop me? I'll show you -- I'll be the best reporter in Cularin! In the galaxy! If you put me in fashion, I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine!"

Armistice (VO): Strong words, from a young woman on the verge of being fired. But how close has she come to being right?

A montage begins, clips without sound of Yara interacting with everyone from Senator Wren, to Nirama, to Jedi Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk. We see her doing person-on-the-street interviews, laughing from the news desk. We see her in what many consider her finest hour, anchoring coverage of Operation False Horizon, reporting on the first battles of the Thaereian Conflict. Her hair askew, her make-up half-finished, she has never looked more poised, more self-contained, than she does in these clips. The image shifts back to Armistice.

Armistice: What has she done? I will tell you what Yara Grugara has done. She has bewitched Cularin! Yes, you heard me right. This woman -- who once suggested that the Jedi should be expelled from the system, only to later recant and play snide word-games with her own statements -- has brought all of Cularin under her spell. Millions tune in every night to listen to her. She has over three thousand nodes dedicated to her life and career on Cularin's holonet alone. She has been the subject of almost as many interviews as she's conducted, and recent rumors have several of the networks out of Coruscant vying for her services. And if Coruscant is interested in her, what else might Yara Grugara have her fingers in?

An image of Yara appears. She looks smug, satisfied, and very much as if she has something to hide. Behind her, her shadow stretches just a bit too high against the wall, the shoulders just a bit too broad. The smug grin on her face seems to stretch, though nothing else in the image is moving.

Armistice: Who are her allies? How has a young woman of such modest talents risen so far, so fast? If you believe, as I do, that there must be more to this story, you must order your copy of "Yara Grugara: Unauthorized and Totally Real" today. Trust me, my friends -- you will not regret the purchase.

In All Things Balance

The studio is dark. Yara Grugara -- anchorperson, socialite, voice of a community -- sits in a plain grey chair, wearing a plain grey suit, her hair pulled back in a tasteful, almost timid, bun. Her hands are folded in her lap. She takes a deep breath as her eyes flicker toward something to one side of the monitor,

and then she speaks.

Yara: Good evening, Cularin. This is Yara Grugara. As you're well aware, a great deal has been happening of late, both in Cularin and in the galaxy at large. Many of us are struggling to understand what this will mean to Cularin, much less to every other being with their eyes now turned to Coruscant. And one of the words that keeps coming up in discussions of recent events is "balance." Given the context in which we keep hearing the word, it seemed most appropriate for Yara to obtain the Jedi perspective. This is not, as most of us are aware, quite as easy as it once was. I have with me today, via remote, two Jedi. We will be referring to them as "Nute" and "Rune," though these are not their real names. Nute, Rune -- welcome to the show.

Two screens spring to life behind Yara. On each screen we see the profile of an individual, slightly blurred at the edges. The screen on the left is labeled "Rune," and the screen on the right, "Nute." A message scrolls across the bottom of our screen: "Voices have been masked to protect the identities of the innocent."

Nute: Thank you, Yara.

Rune: Yes, thank you.

Yara: A great deal has happened in the past few weeks. Many, in particular the supporters of the Jedi, suggest that the changes we've seen may not bode well for the galaxy. But there is a very vocal portion of the population that seems to be saying that what has gone on was necessary, in order to restore balance. Yara's confused by this statement, as are many others. So tell me -- from your perspective, what is the meaning of balance? Is it something we should be striving for?

A long pause.

Rune: It's a tough question. The core idea isn't flawed. The universe is able to exist because the forces that create it are balanced with one another. If gravity were too strong, we couldn't move -- we'd be crushed against the surface of the planet, liquefy. But if gravity were too weak, we might float out of our atmosphere. It takes a balance of many factors to create a livable environment.

Nute: Leaving aside my colleague's questionable assumptions about physics, yes. There has to be balance. In all things. It's the way the galaxy operates. For

every action, an equal and opposite reaction.

Yara: But this goes beyond simple matters of physics, doesn't it?

Nute: It might. But I can see that this interview might go on for a long time without us getting to the core issues. I think there are questions you don't want to ask, Yara. If you don't mind my saying so. So do you mind if we simply speak? We will . . . extemporize. Stipulating that we've not been coached in any way, and stating categorically that we approached you about this interview, and not the other way around.

Rune: If there are things you'd like clarified when we're done, you're welcome to ask. You can also disclaim any knowledge of or agreement with what we're going to say.

Yara shrugs and puts away her datapad. This doesn't seem to be quite what she was expecting, but she doesn't look particularly disappointed.

Rune: What we want to discuss is the nature of balance in the Force. It's not something we were ever taught much about. There were prophecies, statements that said there would be someone who would bring balance to the Force. But it wasn't ever exactly clear to us what was unbalanced, or where it might have come from.

Nute: If you look back at the history of the Jedi, it seems like we have always had the Sith to contend with. For generations, they would disappear, but it wasn't like we ever forgot about them. We still learned about them, about who they were and what they did. But there were only ever two of them. By their choice, not ours. If it had been up to us, there wouldn't have been any.

Rune: With what's gone on, a lot of people are wondering if that would have made things worse. If we'd managed to kill them all off, would that have created even more of an imbalance in the Force? What would have happened? I don't think it would have been possible to create a total imbalance, though.

Nute: No. The dark side is too powerful and too tempting. Just look around Cularin, look at the Believers and all the others who seem to toy with the dark side. There was never going to be a way to wipe them all out. It didn't stop us from trying, though.

Rune: It may be that we were upsetting the balance. The Force is a living thing,

after all. It's not static, it changes as we change, grows as we grow. It is what connects us all to one another. But with so many Jedi and so few Sith, it may be that it did grow out of balance. Maybe that was the Sith plan all along -- let us build our numbers, knowing that in strength, we would create an imbalance that would lead to our downfall. Maybe by doing what we did -- fighting to protect the innocent and keep the darkness at bay -- we may have actually made things worse. We may have brought this fate upon ourselves.

Nute: Not all of us believe that.

Rune: Enough do.

Nute: Some. It's a useless fatalism, though. We did what we felt was right. We can't ask ourselves to do more than that. It's foolish. Unrealistic. If we made a mistake in thinking that we could have light without darkness, then it was an optimistic mistake. Certainly not one deserving of what's been happening to the galaxy.

Yara: You know, there have been other people who made mistakes. Who followed the wrong path early in their lives, only to discover that they had something more to contribute. Which is just to say, I think we shouldn't hold people's mistakes against them. Wouldn't you agree?

Nute: Is this about that video biography we keep seeing advertised?

Yara: If you can call it that. Not a shred of truth about my character! Why --

Rune: You see? This is exactly the problem. People look at their own pathetic lives and think it compares to the colossal blunder the Jedi made. We live in a galaxy predicated on balance, in which all things -- Nute said it first -- *all things must be balanced*. Where there is light, there must be dark. But did we pay attention to that in our own studies? No. We learned one side, and by ignoring the other, opened ourselves up to trouble.

Yara: So you think the Jedi should have been teaching the ways of the Sith?

Nute: Preposterous!

Rune: Absolutely!

A moment of stunned silence follows.

Rune: It only stands to reason. If we created an imbalance by only learning the light side, then the remedy would have been for us to learn the dark side as well. I mean, it's all the Force, isn't it? That's the flaw in all Jedi logic, the idea that one part of a whole can be better than the other part. But the whole can't exist without both aspects, can it? No person is truly light, or truly dark. We're all tempted, at one time or another. Even sweet little Yara, with her indiscretions and her temper tantrums --

Yara: There was some selective editing done there.

Rune: Just like the selective editing used in choosing the curriculum to teach Padawans! We can't claim to understand the Force. We've never experienced most of it, never let ourselves experience huge pieces of what it can do!

Nute: Rune, you need to stop. Listen to yourself.

Rune (increasingly frantic): I am listening! Are you? Look at what we've done! Look at the mess we've made of the galaxy! We trusted the wrong people, walked into traps with our eyes shut because we couldn't allow ourselves to open them to the truth.

Nute: The truth is that convictions matter. Doing what is right matters.

Rune: Doing what is right never mattered! Can't you see that? You hypocritical, half-brained, Kushiban-loving freak! We did what we thought mattered, but it turns out, we were doing exactly what the Sith needed us to do, to play right into their plan! All because we couldn't be bothered to look beyond the little box that our Masters told us was the Force, when it was obvious from everything we saw, everything we read, that there was a great deal more to the galaxy.

Yara: Maybe we should --

Nute (starting to rise): Rune, listen to me --

Rune's hand comes up, palm out, then balls into a fist. Nute gasps and sputters, hands flying to his throat. Air tries to rattle through his throat, fails, falls back into his lungs with a desperate gurgle.

Rune (shouting): You want balance? You want *balance*? I'll give you *balance*, I'll give you --

The Calm Before the Storm

No matter how sophisticated the machine, some down time must be introduced into any working cycle or the entire system falls apart. Whether the pause is needed to let moving parts cool or for data to be tabulated in an effort to avoid corruption before new information is collected, every device from computers to swoop engines needs a break once in a while.

Sentient beings are no different, especially on the distant world of Cularin. All people, heroes and villains alike, take advantage of any lull in the storm that is life . . .

The big man lifted his victim nearly a meter off the ground and pulled back his fist. A pair of sweeping blades attached to a gleaming silver handle was cradled in the fist's massive fingers, a delicate grasp for such a powerfully built hand. With the touch of a glowing amber button, the blades began to vibrate, sending a faint and eerie whine through the trash-strewn alley.

"I hope you understand, sir; this is entirely a business situation. Neither my partner nor I bear any malice toward you."

As the blades reached a fevered pitch, the huge assailant smiled in an unsettlingly friendly way and started to drive his exotic weapon forward.

"Wait!"

The voice was almost too late, and though the muscular assassin tried to halt the progress of his weapon, he succeeded only in turning it aside. The slight change in course was, however, enough to keep the Rodian Throwing Razor from shearing through his target's chest. Instead, it cleaved deep into the formed plascrete wall beside the unfortunate, sending large shards of shrapnel in all directions.

"Mister Haque." The massive killer turned his gaze to the alley's newcomer. "Your presence, as always, is appreciated, but the same cannot be said for your interruption or the volume of your voice."

The shorter man, dressed head to toe in military-issue fatigues and body armor, dipped his head in a polite apology. "Please forgive the discordance and the misfortunate timing of my arrival, my dear Mister Zlash. I think, however, you will find it easier to allow me such a courtesy if you will allow an explanation."

Mister Zlash, as he had been called, kept the man in his other hand elevated. With a slight smile creasing his thin lips, the assassin-for-hire nodded like a ch'hala tree swaying in the wind. "Consider the courtesy extended."

"Very kind, Mister Zlash. It would seem the remuneration for the deletion you were about to perform is delinquent arriving in our financial accounts on Coruscant."

A grimace replaced the smile. "Is there any reason forthcoming as to the nature of this -- *delay*?"

Mister Haque held up a datapad, showing his almost Neolithic partner an image of a Human man and several bars of tiny, scrolling text all displayed in the characteristic font of Holonet News. "It would seem our employer is a Separatist sympathizer working for -- and, it would appear, against -- the Republic Senate."

Zlash's wide eyes narrowed, and as they did, his grip tightened. As his left hand was already around his victim's throat, this elicited an alarmingly loud choking sound from the man. "A fact, my good Mister Haque, that bears no relevance on why we have not been paid."

"Agreed, Mister Zlash, but it also seems he was executed this morning for treason against the Republic." Mister Haque shook his head reproachfully. "Tragically, it would seem his termination came before his payment to us cleared. Even more unfortunately, our erstwhile employer's accounts have been frozen, making extraction of said payment quite impossible."

The huge hand around the man's throat loosened just enough to stop throttling him. "Most unfortunate. Am I to understand then that we have not been paid for this service, which I was about to render in good faith?"

"Correct."

"Acting as I was under the assumption of a valid contract and terms of

compensation agreed upon by all parties involved?"

"Succinctly put."

"Not counting, of course, the party currently gasping for what respiration he can obtain past the pressure of my palm against his larynx?"

"Presumably not, yes."

"And that, because of our would-be procurer's untimely demise, the chances of us getting any form of tender in return for said efforts is negligible?"

"At best."

The gargantuan killer shrugged, a gesture that lifted the man another three inches off the ground. "Well . . ."

Standing with one hand on a bone-white ivory inlaid blaster, Mister Haque echoed his partner's unsettled tone. "Well."

With that, Mister Zlash set the man on the ground, sheathed his razor, and dusted off his almost-victim's coat with two mammoth hands. "You of course know what this means, don't you, Mister Haque?"

A reticent nod accompanied the much smaller assassin's response. "I am afraid I do."

Mister Zlash stared down into the terrified eyes of his prey. "It would seem my partner and I owe you an apology, Mr. Chistor. We have done you a disservice, and for that, we offer our sincerest regrets."

The shorter hunter moved gracefully around to his partner's left side and smiled sadly. "We assure you, we are typically more professional than this. Work in the galaxy is becoming very complex, and we allowed our eagerness at getting a lucrative Coruscant contract to get the better of us."

Reaching into his blast vest, the only article of clothing on his chest, Mister Zlash pulled out a mangled blaster pistol and handed it back to the stunned bureaucrat. "We will, of course, pay for damages, both to this fine weapon and the speeder we unfortunately had to eviscerate during our pursuit."

"Undoubtedly." Mister Haque returned a small communicator, still smoking

from the sword strike that rendered it useless only a few minutes before. "We will also let the matter of the bruises sustained by myself during our previous struggle go without incident. You have quite a left hook, Mr. Chistor; few of our victims ever make contact, much less draw blood. Well done, sir."

Mister Zlash dropped one of his hammerlike hands down onto Barnab Chistor's shoulder, reminding the man suddenly of every part of his battered body that still ached. "My partner and I insist that you let us buy you breakfast before returning you to your office. Our treat, of course."

Mister Haque echoed with equal determination. "Of course."

With no real option available to refuse and no assurance that he would survive doing so, Barnab nodded his approval as quickly as his tortured neck would allow.

"Excellent. We know a wonderful holistic restaurant in Hedrett run by an Ithorian. All his ingredients come from his clan's Hive Ship, so the quality is unquestionable . . ."

And with that, the two deadly stalkers led Gadrin's governor to their speeder and disappeared into the tangle of streets beyond.

From the Cradle to the Grave

They sat, staring at the last slice of kaavo like kilassin around a fresh kill. Three hungry mouths, and just one piece of laden crust with the aroma of meat and cheese wafting across the table to make them water. This always happened when Val-Aruun manned the bakery's ovens. He was the only chef who insisted on cutting kaavo into tenths; everyone else made six slices. Six divided fine. Ten . . . didn't.

"So," asked Renna, her green-scaled lips widening at the thought of snagging the last piece, "how are we going to decide this time?"

The largest person at the table by far, Ooorlak, smashed one hairy fist down on the table and lifted it again, voting as he always did for an arm-wrestling match. As one of Cularin's reigning champions at the sport, he was certain to

win any such contest among those present today.

Renna and Sal were quite aware of this fact, which is why they never took Ooorlak up on his challenges. With a soft scoff, Sal put one well-manicured hand over the Wookiee's massive paw and shook his head. "Another time, perhaps, my friend. I think what this situation calls for is a trial by elocution."

Renna rolled her eyes -- quite an amusing expression for a Rodian -- and then laughed as Ooorlak howled in protest. With a deep chuckle, she corrected her brown-and-black-furred companion. "No, Oool, electricity isn't involved. He said el-o-cution."

The Wookiee still seemed concerned, even a little confused. Barking a query, he folded his arms and sulked. They never let him arm wrestle for anything any more. He felt quite put upon, really. Apparently, you break *one* Trandoshan's arm in four places, and suddenly you're a competition pariah.

The Rodian woman smiled slightly. "It's a big word that means 'talking,' Oool. Looks like you aren't the only one trying to play to his strengths." She shot Sal a look, regarding the smug Human trader with an appraising, critical gaze. For his part, Sal just shrugged and sipped at his juice.

"I'll accept your terms, Human, but you have to accept mine." Renna, negotiating like the business woman she was, extended a slender emerald hand. "Deal?"

Sal grinned widely and took it into his own, shaking it with an amused laugh. "Deal, Ren. Just name them." He sat back, relaxing into his chair with the look of a man used to getting everything he wanted. Infuriatingly enough, he usually did.

Renna closed the kaavo box to keep the last piece warm and rested her hands on top of it. "You stated the form of the contest, but I get to name the subject of the beguine. That work for you, Oool?"

After then spending five minutes explaining what "beguine" meant to the Wookiee, they were settled. Renna took a deep breath and revealed the topic they would be discussing, a subject very dear to her right now. "Friends, we'll each tell the story of how someone close to us has recently passed on. The best tale wins."

Sal narrowed his eyes, knowing what the Rodian was up to now. He led a very isolated life for the most part, coming out of his offices in Hedrett only for monthly constitucionals in the jungle and every lunch hour to eat with his very small circle of friends. Renna must have been counting on him not having any loved ones, certainly none that had died in the near past. If that was her aim, however, she was sadly mistaken.

"Agreed, woman, and you'll go first." Beside him, Ooorlak just nodded his approval.

With her hands still folded in front of her, Renna sighed. In truth, she'd picked this topic because of a loss that still stung her deeply. Perhaps, she hoped, talking about it would help. "All right, I will." Clearing her throat, she began.

* * * * *

"Teelo was a member of my race, but more than that, he was a friend. We met after some employees of mine brought him back with them on a run for . . . well, Nirama. He was a decent pilot riding the end of a string of bad luck. I took him in, gave him a place to hang his coat, and let him come and go as he wished.

"He went back to work for Nirama and freelanced for me on his off days. He was a little lazy at first, but most men are, so that was all right. I watched him to make sure he wouldn't dip into the company till, and when he showed me he could be trusted, I let him start flying one of my transports. He never brought her back without fuel, and he never got her shot up or crunched; not all of my pilots could say the same.

"For three years, he worked for me like that. His chief loyalty was to N, and I respected that. He respected the flexibility I gave him in his work hours for me. It was a good relationship and I . . ." She trailed off there for a moment, looking down into her glass. "I started to appreciate him for more than just the job.

"You may not know this, either of you, but Tee and I started seeing each other on a personal level. Just dinner and the occasional vid at first, then a little more seriously. He was a good male; he paid his debts and he kept his word. First man I'd been with in a while that did. He was not the brightest podling in the stream, but he was smart enough to treat me well."

She took another deep breath. "Teelo owed Nirama for his ship, and he would

never let me pay it off or get him another. I tried so hard to get him to work for me full time, but his honor wouldn't let him leave N, especially when things started to get tight in the asteroid belt. He just kept saying, 'I need to see the boss through this. When we're done, he'll cut me loose, and then I'm yours. You'll see.'

"Only I'll never see that . . . or him again. That space slug Riboga had his goons out gunning for everyone in Nirama's employ, and Teelo was no exception. They found him coming back from a run to Tilnes and burned him down. He . . ." Her voice wavered, so much so that Oool put his huge hand on her shoulder in support.

"He was on his way to see me, and he died for nothing more than some fragging Hutt's vendetta. Riboga's gone and his people fried, but none of that brings Teelo back to me. I . . ." Her words failed her and, after stopping long enough to catch her breath, she raised her glass. "To Teelo, the finest male I've ever known."

Sal and Ooorlak both did the same, touching their mugs to hers and drinking in the fallen Rodian's honor. The table was quiet for moment before Renna spoke again. "Sal? Want to go next?"

With a quick nod, he waved down a waitress to get refills for the table. Then he took a small necklace out of his pocket and placed it on top of the kaavo box. Its silver chain sparkled in the afternoon sun, a bright sheen that echoed the glow of the ethereally blue crystal adorning it. In a quiet voice far more serious than Renna or Ooorlak had ever heard him use, Sal began his story.

* * * * *

"I am sure it comes as no surprise that in my time on this planet, I've had some business dealings that one might call 'unscrupulous' or 'questionable.' Indeed, Renna's favorite term is, I seem to recall, 'mind-bogglingly criminal.' All perfectly accurate descriptions, I have to admit. Not *everything* I've done on Cularin has been illegal, but I'd be lying if I said most of them weren't.

"I've made deals with the Thaereians, the Cartel, Nirama, Riboga, and dozens of other interests that don't bear naming, mostly because I have a hard time remembering them all. I make a tidy sum off my legitimate businesses, but the real money -- the real power -- is found in the shadows. In the marketplaces

and back room meetings you won't find on any map or scheduling program.

"In any case, I don't tend to make any close contacts in my line of work; it's not healthy, if you know what I mean. The most I ever do is learn people's names, so I can keep track of them in case they double-cross me. I don't get involved; it's a hard and fast rule for me. No exceptions."

He took a long, deep drink, the taste of the bittersweet burshka juice making him grimace. "Well, almost no exceptions. Before you all knew me, my business dealings were darker than they are now. I mean a *lot* darker. Neither of you would still be sitting here with me if you knew some of the things I've done or paid people to do.

"It was during that time that I met her -- the Black Queen." His eyes practically misted over in memory. "So elegant, so vicious, so very much my kind of woman. The moment I met her, I knew I had to work with her. She did things the same way I did. We were perfect for each other.

"Perfect, that is, until she had a change of heart. In one night, she folded up her organization and dropped out of sight. I didn't hear from her again for almost three months. I didn't know if she was dead or alive, if she was lying low or lying three meters under. Her vanishing act made me do the same. Some of her former associates were not the sort of people you wanted to be near when things were tense -- and trust me, things were blaster-level intense.

"Zelice -- that was her name, Zelice Sturm -- found me in one of the dives she used to keep for operatives in over their heads. I'd started dealing again, nothing serious, but enough to keep me solvent. She was there, she was alive, but there was just something . . . different about her. At first, I was afraid she was there to 'liquidate' a loose end -- me -- but one look in her eyes, and I knew better. She wasn't there to hurt me.

"She was there to *save* me. We stayed up all night talking in that run-down factory. She told me about her past, about her hatred for the Jedi Order and how she'd left it behind out of bitterness and resentment. She told me how a group of truly brave souls risked their lives to bring her back from that darkness. I wasn't sure I really understood anything she was saying, but I could *feel* the difference in her.

"I can't explain how or even why she did it, but she changed my life that night. When she left to return to Almas, I dropped all my worst contacts, turned

them over to OPS, and started focusing on other things. I still make an obscene amount of money, of course, but I don't do it off the blood and pain of others anymore."

He looked down at the crystal for a long time before finishing his tale. Renna and Oool glanced at each other in concern, but before they could prompt him, he spoke again.

"She gave me this necklace before she went back to the Academy. She told me to keep it to remember her by, that she probably wouldn't see me again. I wanted her to stay, but she wouldn't. She couldn't. She had a duty, she said, and her time was almost gone. Then, so was she. She died on Almas, with all the rest. Somehow, I think she knew she would. I just wish I understood why she'd go back there if she did."

Sal raised his glass and his friends followed suit quickly. Over the clink of glass and pottery, he said, "To Zelice Sturm, Jedi Master and the best friend I never deserved." They all drank, with him drinking the deepest and the longest.

When they were all finished and the glasses refilled, Sal and Renna turned to regard their furry friend. "Ooorlak, I believe it's your turn," Renna said quietly. Sal nodded, his voice not quite up to speaking again so soon.

The Wookiee nodded emphatically and raised his hands to the open sky. He was obviously gearing up for an epic tale and while his style of speech sometimes left a lot to be desired, neither of his friends could ever fault his enthusiasm. They both sat back in their chairs; this could and probably would take a while.

* * * * *

Surprisingly, the story was short but no less heartfelt for the brevity. Ooorlak howled and trilled his way through the events of two years ago, when a vital conference held in space on behalf of Cularin was assaulted by forces far greater than any could have imagined. In the terrible fighting that took place, many brave warriors died defending the delegates and protecting the fragile peace they represented.

Ooorlak rose out of his chair and began to move around the table as he spoke, physically acting out elements from his story. He stung a spanner from his belt as if it were a lightsaber as he recalled the greatest hero in the battle, Jedi

Master Kirlocca. A kinsman from his extended tribe, Kirlocca was apparently a proud part of Ooorlak's past, one he told them about now in great detail. Great, *loud* detail.

Finally, his story brought him to the end, standing amid the now-abandoned tables nearby with his spanner raised. Ooorlak painted the scene on that ill-fated star cruiser quite vividly, describing the foes surrounding Kirlocca and the young Padawans at his side. One by one, the enemy fell, but each victory came at the cost of another young life. Ooorlak looked around at his imaginary allies, just as the Jedi Master did, and acted out the great Wookiee's noble sacrifice.

Betrayed from behind by a false Jedi he'd been protecting, Kirlocca remained proud and strong as he bought time for the delegates and the other heroes aiding them with his own life. The Jedi Master fell in battle, but he did so with honor, steadfast to the very end.

Ooorlak looked up at the table where his friends were seated; he was on his knees from where he'd portrayed the final moments of his tribesman. He bowed his head in memory and rose to his feet, quietly returning to his chair. This time, it was Renna and Sal who raised their glasses first, both deeply impressed with their friend. The Wookiee grunted the closest thing to gratitude his native tongue allowed.

Their glasses came together and they drank a final toast, this time to the noble Weapons Master and Jedi, Kirlocca of Almas. Afterward, they sat in silence, glancing at one another, lost in their own memories of the honored dead.

It was Sal who finally broke their collective reverie. "Is there any possible way to judge one of those stories over the others?"

Renna and Ooorlak shook their heads in unison. "No," she said in a hushed tone. "How could we?" She looked down at the kaavo box, long since forgotten as the original point of their contest. "Not that it matters," she added. "I am not at all hungry any more."

Sal agreed, as did Ooorlak. The Wookiee reached forward and took the box in his hands. Chirping and growling, he suggested that they take it to the Crosstown Bar and leave it at the Wall of Remembrance. Covered with stories and keepsakes of all the people who had fallen in defense of Cularin, it seemed the perfect place to end the journey they'd just taken together.

They rose as one and started the long walk to the Crosstown. "They aren't really gone, are they?" Sal asked quietly.

No one answered. No one needed to.

Faded Colors

There are several forces working at any given time in the Cularin system. Many struggle for the good of all, from the Tarasin that live in harmony with the Force to the many heroes that keep life safe for all the system's sentient inhabitants. The remaining Jedi of Almas work side by side with scoundrels and rogues to ward off the seemingly endless threats to peace and security throughout Cularin. Politicians and scientists, fringe workers and mysterious adepts -- all are united toward a common goal: survival.

But despite the best efforts of Cularin's saviors, some threats cannot be intercepted or even foreseen before they strike. The system's heroes have every reason to be proud of their accomplishments, but sometimes pride -- as they say -- goeth before the fall . . .

It was a long way from the jungle path to the front steps of the Training Hall, but it was a walk Barnab Chistor knew very well. He had been making this trek four times a week since being inducted into the service of the Master in Violet. A mysterious woman with eyes like an autumn sunset, he'd been powerless to refuse her invitation to join her classes at the martial complex of the Five Masters.

In truth, studying under the Master in Violet had been the best thing to happen to him, and he knew it. Not only was he in a better physical condition than he had ever known possible, her meditation techniques had helped him with his administration work for Gadrin. His city was healthy, he was healthy, and his love life . . .

Barnab blushed at the fleeting thought, images of the Master in Violet always flashing through his mind whenever he let his focus stray. No matter what his feelings toward his teacher were, or even what she might return, theirs was a master/student relationship first. He always had to respect that, no matter how often the line might have strayed -- or, he mused with a soft sigh, how far

it might stray again.

Then, as he topped a familiar rise on the well-worn trail beneath his sandaled feet, he saw it and his heart skipped a beat. A plume of smoke rose out of the thick canopy ahead. Too thick to be a cookfire and too dark to be leaves and grass, it guttered into the clouds above. All other thoughts disappeared. *Get to the Hall now!*

Barnab ran like his life depended on it, but his life wasn't his concern. He bounded through the undergrowth, his vibroblade unsheathed and clearing the way as fast as he could swing. Meter after meter of dense green flew past as he made his way to what he prayed would be just another class in the Violet Gallery. He ran breathlessly for the last kilometer, daring to hope that this was all a misunderstanding.

Those hopes were dashed the moment he entered the clearing. The spires of the Training Hall had been gutted by fire, its stained glass windows shattered and lying like discarded jewels on the blackened grounds. All around him, there was naught but destruction and death.

Clutching his humming blade, Barnab moved past more than a dozen shriveled bodies on the front steps of the hall. Their flesh withered and their bones shattered, their faces were contorted by terrible agony. He could not recognize them by what remained of their features, but their uniforms were all the identification he needed. They were fellow students, some in white and others in green. He didn't see their Masters on the steps, but he feared he would find them inside.

The doors to the Hall were lying in charred heaps in the entry chamber, and past them, his fears were confirmed. There, impaled on a spar of ch'hala wood from the Hall's gables, was the broken form of the Master in Green. His massive form, larger even than most Wookiees, was shriveled and wasted, most of his once rich brown fur now white and nearly translucent. The Master's rictus grin was unnerving, and Barnab found himself turning away in horror. *What could have done this?*

The massacre continued inside. More figures lay strewn down every hallway he could see. Steeling his will, the appalled governor headed into the charnel house. Determined to make his way to the Violet Gallery, he tried to empty his mind and not dwell on the carnage lying all around him. Walls streaked in blood, shattered doors lying in still-burning piles over charred bodies and

shreds of colored clothing . . .

It was everything he could do to endure the stench and the stinging clouds of smoke, but he managed to navigate the sundered complex far enough to reach the Garden of Peace at its center. The sanctuary had been horribly violated, draped now in corpses instead of flowers and fragrant only in the foul odors of the dead.

He regretfully pushed the body of the fallen Master in Red out of the doorway he needed to use, wincing as bits of it fell off in the process. Whatever had done this hadn't just killed these people, Barnab thought. It drained them.

As he stepped into the hall over the red-shrouded body, he heard a sound up ahead -- the sound of combat! Someone was still alive! He moved more quickly, bolstered by hope, however vain it might be. He had to look away as he dashed through the White Gallery, disturbed that every other footstep was over or on top of a former student. He paused just long enough to pay a moment's final respect to the Master in White. Sprawled in the center of a ring of fallen pupils, he had obviously died fighting. They all had.

He couldn't dwell on that right now; the sound of battle kept him running. He turned his vibrosword off so the sound of it wouldn't give him away as he neared the cacophony ahead. He saw with growing dread that it was coming from inside the Violet Gallery, but that was a good sign as well. Fighting meant she might still be alive!

He did not have to open the door; it was already in smoldering flinders. He tucked and rolled, vaulting through the rent doorframe to keep from getting ambushed if anyone was waiting just inside it.

But there was no one there. All the conflict was near the heart of the room, on the woven Zabrak desert mat his Master used for duels and trials of advancement. He recalled, in the way that a mind wanders even in the most dire of moments, how much he feared standing in its center ring, and how often he'd left it in failure. He was a good student of K'thri, though certainly not the best.

No, the best was a teenaged Human woman who'd bested him every time they sparred. He saw her twisted body hanging from the rafters above him, a grimace of unspeakable pain on her once-pleasant face. If she could not stand

against the force that assailed this place, what chance did he have?

On the mat, he saw the only thing that could give him hope in this dark hour. The Master in Violet was still alive, though she was bleeding heavily from the mouth and nose, and her stance showed that her left leg was at least sprained, if not broken. She was wielding something he'd given her as a gift months ago - a long spar of metal from a distant asteroid, taken from the wreckage of a crashed starship. With a lengthy and expensive amount of work, he'd managed to get the shard of what some on Cularin had dubbed "songsteel" turned into a fighting staff for his Master. Now, it seemed to be the only thing saving her life.

Her foe was impossible to see clearly. Surrounded by shifting, impossibly deep shadows, it held aloft a similar weapon. Similar, but not at all the same once Barnab got a closer look at it. The staff it was swinging with devastating skill and speed was utterly black and difficult to look at. Every sense he had and several he'd never felt before screamed at him that the weapon was utterly *wrong*.

His Master had but seconds left to her; he could see her strength fading as the shadowy figure pressed its relentless assault. With no time to even cross the room and no chance of fighting that monstrosity, Barnab reached for something he'd hoped he would never have to use. It was a ranged weapon, and the Master in Violet would certainly scold him for using it -- assuming she lived to do so.

Barnab raised a small gray handgun at the living fiend of shadow and pulled its trigger. The weapon was an experimental device created nearly a year earlier to fight the Jedi Killer in Hedrett. It never saw use in that battle, but Barnab had always carried it just in case some other menace threatened his people. He had no idea how (or even *if*) it worked, but when facing certain death, any toss of the dice was a good one.

The gun made a high-pitched whine and jerked in his hand, discharging its tiny rocket with a plume of noxious smoke and a roar of flame. Both his Master and the figure turned to face him as it hurtled arrow-straight into the thing's shadowy body. Something within it must have been solid enough for the rocket to impact because there was a tremendous flash of light and the sound of an explosion.

Barnab didn't wait for his eyes to clear. He had already been running toward the Master in Violet, and by the time the missile detonated, he was crashing

into her and knocking her to the ground. Several seconds slipped past as he tried to clear his head; the rocket's report had been both blinding and deafening.

When he could see again, the Master in Violet was slowly regaining her feet, leaning heavily on her staff. There was nothing where the shadow had been; no trace was left behind, its weapon gone. "Did . . ." he managed to gasp out, ". . . did I get it?"

The Master in Violet looked down at him with pain-filled, golden eyes. "No." Her voice was hard to make out; the thunder in his ears was still echoing. "It escaped." She pointed toward the far wall of the Gallery, where a huge smoking hole now led to the jungle outside. The trees visible near the hole were withering and dying, as if all the life was being torn from them by some dark hand.

Barnab staggered to his feet. "At least you're all right." He retrieved his blade and sheathed it as he reached out to touch her shoulder. "We need to get you out of here."

She nodded and placed her fingers on the back of his sword hand. "I think escape for both of us would be a wise idea." Her voice was halting and slightly choked; from the look of her chest, she was likely suffering from broken ribs. "And I would not be so quick to lower your sword."

Barnab blinked and looked at her. "Do you think it will return?"

She shook her head and raised her staff in a defensive posture. "No, dear one. I am not concerned with the foe that just departed."

"Then what, Master?" He drew his vibroblade and thumbed its activation switch.

"I am more concerned with the foes it has left in its wake."

Even as she spoke, even as he turned to stand at her side, the fallen students in the Violet Gallery began to twitch and rise. Empty eyes stared into the void as they regained their feet. From above, a dead woman fell from the rafters and stood back up, bones breaking even as she reached forward, fingers hooked like the claws of a beast.

"But -- but how? How is this possible?" Barnab gaped in horror as the bodies of his friends and classmates stalked slowly toward them.

The Master in Violet spun her staff and brought it down to point at the closest one. "Question later. Fight now."

Closed Circuits

Gamma Squad moved through the complex, looking for any signs of motion. Each time a flicker appeared on their heads-up displays, a rapid burst of blaster fire put an end to it. Metal sprayed in all directions and circuits sizzled; droids lay in pieces from the facility's landing platform to its center of operations.

The latter was Gamma's goal, and it was a hard fight to get there. Gamma Three was lying in their transport; his condition was questionable at best. Clone or not, he was still a living being, and that life was hanging by a very thin thread. Every minute that passed now could be his last. Understandably, the squad wanted to get this operation over as fast as possible.

Barring their way was a tempered steel blast door and a hardened inner bunker. Gamma had already taken out the command center's automated defenses and droid guards. The hardpoint was no longer a threat, but for this mission to be a sweep, Gamma Squad had to breach the operations core and do what they came to do.

"Listen up, Gamma," came the terse voice of One, the squad's commander. "Standard breaking charges have failed, and we aren't carrying anything heavier. Power's been shut off to the doors, so slicing them open's impossible." A long pause followed, then, "I'm open to suggestions at this point."

As always, Gamma Four was the first to reply. "We waste the site with orbital fire and sift through the wreckage?" And, as always, Gamma Four's reply was violent and direct.

Gamma Two answered for his commanding officer. "We need the core intact, Four, and we have orders to make this a covert operation. How covert would a turbolaser battery be?"

Four shrugged, his heavy powered armor amplifying the gesture greatly.

"Depends if we leave anyone alive to see it."

One made a sharp pass with his gauntleted hand. "Enough. This line of discussion isn't helping, and Three doesn't have time for it, anyway. I want answers, not debates."

After considering the problem (and, as usual, completely discounting Four), Gamma Five raised his hand. "Sir, if we locate the hardwire leading to the doors, I can patch my suit's system into it and manually slice them. Cutting off power means the enemy doesn't have any more control over those blast doors than we do right now."

Gamma One nodded slowly, then more vigorously. "Good. Let's make it happen." He gestured for Two to stand with Five. "You two find that line and get this done. Four, fall in behind me."

The heavily armored squad of Republic Commandos moved with a purpose, backing away from the commander center to the next nearest power junction. One and Four covered every approach angle with their modified heavy rifles, making sure their comrades could work in relative safety.

For five minutes, they cut through corridor metal and searched along tangles of identical wiring bundles. The facility was entirely run by droids, so many of the amenities of a human installation like labeled wires were absent. It made for slow going, but Gamma Five's advanced electronic training was making short work of the hunt. "I need those doors open in 30, Five."

"Right away, sir!"

As if responding to the exchange of voices, life got complicated. Wall panels down the left and right corridors slid open, disgorging unfamiliar droid models with very obvious weapons. What they lacked in finesse, they tried to make up for in firepower. Blaster arms blazing, they marched, rolled, and trundled toward the squad of commandos without a second's pause.

"Incoming!" shouted Four, needlessly.

"Less talk, more shock!" One opened up with the underslung barrel of his rifle. Ion pulses lashed out, tearing through the advancing droids. Crackling electrical arcs leapt between their robotic foes, felling several with each shot. Gamma Four followed suit, switching his rifle to its ion setting and laying down as much

fire as he could.

As the teeming metal hordes closed in, it became clear their firepower and training weren't enough. For every ten droids that fell, twenty more came pouring into the complex. Four's voice pointed out the blazingly obvious, "Our position's getting overrun, sir!"

One muttered, "So glad you're here to point that out, soldier." Then he flipped a switch on his rifle and pumped off two shots in rapid succession. The streaks of light that erupted from his heavy gun propelled a pair of metal cylinders into the mass of droids ahead. "Mag burst up!"

All four commandos switched off their suits, going completely powerless even as blaster shots tore at their dense plating. Then, in a brilliant cascade of white light, the whole world went painfully silent. After roaring an all-clear without the benefit of an audio enhancer, One turned on his suit again. Even powered down, the electronics of his armor were sluggish to respond. As soon as he was up and functioning, he motioned for the others to do the same.

They were in the center of a sea of broken robots, a lifeless mass of motionless metal. The occasional spark flared in a chassis or twitch shook a steel limb, but all the droids were completely offline -- victims of a magnetic pulse grenade, compliments of weaponsmiths back on Coruscant.

"No time for gawking, men! Five, get me that line!"

The rest was more simple. They restored power to the doors, forced them open, and used close assault tactics to deal with the droids inside. The command consoles had to be captured intact, which meant no ranged fire. It was a hectic battle, but aside from some vibroblade damage to Four's chestplate and a vicious slash that pierced Two's helmet, Gamma squad took no injuries. (Later, Four would comment that the scar made Two look "all tough and masculine." Injuries *would* occur from that incident, but those were yet to come.)

Once inside, One had Five finish their mission. A command card was swapped in the main controls and cross-wired to the installation's communication system. Flipping a switch, the complex began sending out a coded core override to every droid the facility had ever constructed. Though the droids would not act differently, they were now under the covert control of the

Republic.

Gamma One sent everyone back to the ship and planted the timed charge on the installation's power generator himself. Double-timing it back to their vessel, he activated its timer and shouted for immediate evac.

"One accident, ready to blow! Let's get out of here!"

"Yeah!" chimed in Four. "Let's blaze, 'cause I smell something Uffel."

Injuries would occur from this comment as well . . .

Home Again

Everything was wrong with his universe.

He had to duck away from the sparks, a maneuver that cost him a precious fraction of a second. Gunfights were full of those instantaneous decisions, just one more reason he preferred life with his blaster in its holster. That wasn't an option right now.

Of course, Warlan Tosk had lots of reasons to hate his present situation, but there was no time to dwell on any of them. Right now, there was only time to breathe and squeeze, breathe and squeeze. His blaster was getting hot in his hand; that was not a good sign. A fine weapon, its custom grips only let heat build up when he was using it too much or when it was firing off the last of its power pack.

Right now, both were happening, and Warlan didn't have a spare -- a spare power pack *or* a spare blaster. "When I'm out of shots, they'll stroll right up and --"

"I'm working as fast as I can," she grumbled. "I'm a Senator, not a slicer!"

He sighed and nodded to himself. Less chatter, more combat. His next few shots would be his last, so they had to count, or else both he and Lavina were dead. Warlan breathed deeply and drew a bead, then fired a brilliant beam of yellow-white light that hit one of their assailants in the throat. The result was . . . messy.

Unfortunately, another result was a barrage of incoming fire that took centimeters off the steel barrier he was using for cover. The squad in front of

him had already lost eight of their number, and number nine going down didn't sit too well with them.

"They don't like you much!" he heard from behind him, where, if the universe had any mercy, Ms. Wren was boosting open the doors to their ship.

Correction: the ship they were stealing.

"They don't seem to be your biggest fans either, Senator! Or should I remind you that *I* rescued *you* from *them*?!"

"Don't remind me!" She sounded disgusted. "I've almost got this lock! If this datapad of yours was worth a womp rat's spit in the sand, we'd be in the fragging ship already!"

Warlan couldn't help but smile at the colorful language. He popped off two more shots into a foe as the soldier stood up to throw a grenade. He'd only meant to shoot once, but the first hit didn't drop the poor bleeder. He'd have cursed his sorry luck, but the dropped grenade's blast took out at least two other opponents. Warlan marked that down in the "win" column and ducked for cover again.

"Is that any kind of language for a Senator to be using?" He allowed himself a moment of levity -- his father had taught him that in life or death situations, the winner was usually the person who panicked the least. A level head is vastly more likely to stay on someone's shoulders.

"I'm sure that's *ex*-Senator by now," she spat. "And no, this isn't diplomacy speaking. You heard that on the recording you delivered to the Senate!"

Warlan cringed. That recording had earned him a leg wound and likely his position as a Republic Protector, but his first duty was to his charge. Lavina had asked him to carry the message directly to the Senate's holofeed. Well, she got her wish -- and now they had this lovely "escort" all the way to the hangar.

"You know, Tosk, this is never going to work if that flight window isn't open when we take off! They'll send Jedi Starfighters after us!"

"I've been assured no Jedi will move to stop us, and they've got the only fighters fast enough to catch us! She may look like a piece of junk, but this ship's the fastest thing in the Core!"

His words were punctuated by two things. The first was the death rattle of a faceless soldier hitting the dock plates in front of his barrier, streamers of melted helmet flying through the air. The second was the distinctive whine of his pistol running out of power.

Warlan drew his vibroknives and crouched, ready to spring at the first clone past his hiding spot. He wouldn't last long against these vat-bred killing machines, but maybe he could buy Lavina enough time to escape.

"There!"

The sound of a portal hissing open behind him was enough to spur Warlan into action again. He leapt across the barrier's one opening toward the lowering ramp of the transport. The Senator was already scrambling aboard, and as soon as he hit the lip of the boarding gantry, he did the same. The leap in front of the gap cost him a grazing shot across his shoulders, which he did his best to ignore. Better pain than recapture any day.

Warlan dragged himself into the ship's entry bay and smacked the close button with the butt of a thrown knife. Almost immediately, the sound of armored fists and gunstocks slamming into the door's plating filled the ship.

"It won't take them long to get in!" he warned.

"Let's see if this datapad was worth what you paid for it, then!" Lavina's voice came from the cockpit, where he could also hear a flurry of tiny beeps and whistles. That meant the astromech was on board, just as the coded message had promised.

He backed away from the cacophony at the ramp and staggered to his feet. He was shot up fairly badly, but nothing was critical. He'd live -- assuming they ever got off the ground. Outside, he could faintly hear one of the troopers shouting orders:

"Bring in docking clamps. Contact the Jedi and set up a defense perimeter in orbit. I want two E-webs set up there and there and I want them yesterday!"

Warlan cursed under his breath. He had to give these tubeborn credit; they were competent. "The best soldiers science can grow," he muttered to himself. Then, much louder, "I didn't buy that pad. It's a gift from a concerned citizen!"

His name's on the software tag!"

A sputter of disbelief issued from the cockpit. "He *exists*?"

Silently, Warlan counted the seconds ticking by, weighing how long it would take *him* to set up a tripod mount. "Yes, but if this ship doesn't take off in less than a minute, we won't!"

Even as he spoke, there was a thrum through the vessel as its engines came to life. "I got it! Everything's online!"

"Fantastic," he groaned, hobbling as fast as he could to the cockpit. Sliding into the pilot's chair, he flipped the switch on the automatic belly gun he'd been told about. Outside the ship, unfortunate things happened to the clone troopers around the loading ramp.

With a deep breath to dull the pain along his back, he told the red-and-white droid to take off and follow the flight plan on the datapad rather inelegantly plugged into its chassis. With a quick dash of boops and clicks, the astromech complied, and the ship began to move. The moment the nose of the YT-1300 was past the hangar doors, he closed his eyes and leaned back. . .

. . . into Senator Wren's waiting hands. He opened his eyes in surprise. Lavina was standing behind his chair with a medkit. "You're hurt, Warlan. Let me look at it."

He groaned again but knew better than to argue with her. The last two weeks of hiding and running had made that perfectly clear. The Senator got what the Senator wanted. End of story. "Yes, ma'am."

She treated his burn scar with fairly expert skill and dabbed it with a painkiller. She'd been a quick study since he pulled her out of the rubble of that "safehouse."

"Other than this, how are you?" she asked in a surprisingly gentle voice.

"Physically? I'm five stars. No worries."

She sighed and started wrapping a bandage across his upper torso. "And mentally?"

He echoed her sigh and looked down at his hands. "How should I be? I've

committed treason three times, killed more soldiers of the Republic than I can count, lost the only job I was ever good at, and as soon as we break through Coruscant space, I'll be a wanted fugitive. I feel . . ."

She finished his sentence as her hands brushed his chest. "Lost. Like everything's been pulled out from under you. The good guys have become the bad guys, and the bad guys are even worse. There's no one to trust, nowhere to turn. The only path open is home, and the people there might be just as hostile as the people we just escaped."

He put his hand over her fingers and nodded. As her voice trailed off, he could hear that she was crying behind him. She was a brave woman, perhaps the bravest he'd ever known, but everyone had a breaking point. Her words had marked the passage of hers.

It hurt, but he turned to face her and did the only thing that made sense. He pulled her into his tired arms and kissed her.

She kissed back.

And suddenly, no matter what else happened, all was right with his universe again.

Dark Hope

Stress and trauma can cloud even the strongest mind. Fear and anger are emotions that can sharpen the will but dull its edge at the same time. There are few times more difficult in life than the moment when you come face to face with your inner demons and must make a fateful choice between right and wrong. Worse still are those decisions with no clear definition of which choice is the right one.

When no path seems safe, when every option seems fraught with guilt and peril, which one do you choose?

It occurred to Jeht that the office of the Supreme Chancellor was kept rather cold, something he noticed every time he'd been here previously but never really thought about. He'd always assumed it matched the climate that the

former Senator was used to on Naboo, but Jeht's recent visit to that world had shown him otherwise.

Why, then, was it always so cold here? Master Jeht's body was optimized for speed and grace, a genetic tendency that he'd honed with years of physical training and a Jedi's dietary regimen. That left him with very little body fat and the few unfortunate side effects such a build carried with it -- namely, a lack of resistance to low temperatures. It made being in cold places something of a trial.

Then again, he noted wryly to himself as he waited, why should a visit to Coruscant be any less a crucible than any other day in his life lately?

Jeht was also not much for waiting; he preferred to be moving and doing things over the quiet contemplation of many of his peers. He could meditate, of course, and did so with increasing frequency as the Clone Wars dragged on, but rest was not his natural state of being. He found peace in motion, not stillness.

Thus, it was a very uncomfortable and restless Jedi Master that Supreme Chancellor Palpatine found in his office when he finally arrived.

"Ah, Master Jeht. How good of you to come so promptly." The smiling ex-Senator glided across the room in his ornate, midnight-blue robes of state and settled into his high backed chair. "We appreciate the alacrity."

Jeht raised his hand to wave off the formality. "Sir, I came as quickly as I could, given the urgency of my orders. I feared any delay would only worsen these proceedings."

The Supreme Chancellor looked up from one of the many screens built into his desk and regarded the Jedi Master with a fleeting expression of confusion. "Proceedings?"

With a quiet clearing of his throat, Jeht nodded. "Yes, sir. The communication I received aboard the *Maelstrom* ordered me to bring my fleet to Coruscant immediately so that I might stand before a Board of Inquiry regarding the destruction of Kromus in the Kro'eval system."

The mention of that incident seemed to catch the Supreme Chancellor's attention from whatever he was reading on his desk displays. "Kromus? Oh,

yes. A most tragic affair, to be sure, and the subject of much discussion these days."

Jeht shifted in his chair, growing more uncomfortable by the moment. "Yes, sir. I am sure there will be a full investigation before this matter can be resolved." When the Supreme Chancellor did not immediately respond, he added, "I want you to know that I intend to cooperate fully and abide by whatever decision the Senate --"

It was Palpatine's turn to raise his hand dismissively. "Master Jeht, the Senate will not be conducting your inquiry. That house of politicians is far more preoccupied with keeping their own worlds under control than worrying about the loss of a Separatist stronghold." With a distasteful expression that bordered on a scowl, he concluded, "You won't be defending your actions on Kromus to them."

That was something of a blow to Jeht. He'd feared it would come to this, but he'd offered himself the slim hope that as a Jedi and a General in the Republic Army, he could present his case to a forum of bureaucrats. That would have given him the advantage in knowledge and rank.

But no. "I'll have to speak before a military tribunal then, sir?"

For a moment, the Supreme Chancellor's face was a mask of grim neutrality that only deepened Master Jeht's dread. Then Palpatine's pale lips split in a smile that seemed far warmer than the chill of his office. "No, my dear boy, you just have to answer to me."

After waiting a moment for that to set in for the surprised Jedi, he continued. "Tell me, Darrus, did you do what was necessary?"

"I . . ." Jeht found himself at a loss for words. This wasn't what he'd expected at all. Finally, he replied. "Yes, sir. I did, sir. I had no choice."

The Supreme Chancellor's tone became a strange mix between paternal and vaguely conspiratorial. "And were your actions, terrible as they were, in the interest of galactic security and safety?"

Jeht nodded as confidently as he could. "Yes, sir, they were. If we'd let the Starkiller super weapon clear its facility, it could have made the jump to

hyperspace before we got another weapons lock on it. That would have . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course." Palpatine's smile reappeared. "And if you had to make a similar choice, one that could again mean the destruction of millions or even billions, would you do as you did then?"

The Jedi Master's senses noted something in the air. Without knowing how or why, he suddenly felt convinced that he was standing at a moment in time far more important than it appeared. It was another crossroads, just like the split second before he gave the order to fire on Kromus. His next words would be vital.

With a deep breath, Jeht nodded slowly. "Yes, sir. I stand by my decision and would do so again without hesitation. Peace and security in the galaxy *must* be my primary mission." He set his jaw and finished with, "If it were not, I would not be fit to serve you, the Republic, or the Jedi Council, sir."

And just like that, the die was cast. He'd made a choice, for better or worse, and there was no turning back. Strangely, he also felt as if he'd avoided some great and terrible danger. The Force grew calm around him even as the Supreme Chancellor smiled for a third time and slipped his hands out of the deep sleeves of his robe.

"My boy . . . I am so proud of you. Consider this entire matter over and done with. I will inform the Senate that the inquiry has been conducted, and that you have been exonerated of all charges, pending or otherwise."

Palpatine rose from his chair and gestured for Jeht to do the same. "On a more personal note," he said, coming close enough to rest his hand on the Jedi Master's shoulder, "let me express my admiration for your resolve. If I had more Jedi like you leading the Army, this war would already be won."

Jeht felt a slight flush to his cheeks. He wasn't used to praise, having been raised his whole life in one Academy or another. "Thank you, sir."

The Supreme Chancellor shook his head. "No, Master Jeht, it is I who should thank you. So few have the resolve to do what must be done in this day and age. The Republic has bred generation after generation of weakness at every level of society. Men like you and I see what must be done to keep peace and order in the galaxy. Men willing to use *any means necessary*."

Jeht nodded, not really understanding Palpatine's meaning but appreciating his support. "I meant thank you for taking care of the inquiry, sir. I was worried the Council would seek my removal from service."

Palpatine looked him in the eye and smiled again. "I simply could not allow that, Master Jedi. You are exactly where you need to be. Where I need you to be."

Jeht nodded again, bowed, and excused himself from the office. In part, he wanted to get out of the freezing room and find someplace warmer. He also felt a sudden discomfort that had nothing to do with the temperature. "If you need anything, sir, do not hesitate to contact me on the *Maelstrom*."

Palpatine spoke before he could reach the door. "Actually, Darrus, I do have a question for you. Something to consider while you wait for your shuttle."

The Supreme Chancellor had done him a good turn, one that deserved to be repaid. Jeht stopped and turned toward him. "Of course, sir. Anything you wish."

Palpatine brought his hands together in contemplation and spoke his next words very carefully, as if each were of grave import. The feeling in the back of Jeht's mind led him to believe that indeed they were.

"You have grown very powerful in the Force, and I have kept a close eye on your progress during your tenure with the Jedi. They have taught you much, but surely you have sensed that in some ways -- in many ways -- they keep secrets from you . . ."

Though he trailed off, the Supreme Chancellor resumed speaking before Jeht could interrupt. "I simply want you to consider what you would be willing to do for the whole truth. How much is enlightenment worth to you?"

"How powerful do you wish to become?"

And with that, the Supreme Chancellor opened the door to his office and waved a cordial goodbye to him, wishing Master Jeht a safe voyage back to his ship. The dismissal was as rapid as Palpatine's questions had been deliberate.

As he walked back to the speeder bay at the edge of the Executive Plaza, Jeht gave the Supreme Chancellor's words the consideration they deserved. What

would he be willing to do? How powerful *did* he want to become?

And what did Palpatine mean by "secrets" the Council was keeping from him? He'd never questioned the Council or its motives before, but Palpatine's words changed all that. He was right; Jeht did feel as if there was something he didn't know -- something they'd never told him.

With sudden determination, he turned his airspeeder toward the Republic military hangars and contacted his ship to plot a course back to Almas in the Cularin system. If a secret was being kept from him, that's where he'd learn the truth. Master Windu had conducted a secret meeting with the Academy's headmaster some time ago; the nature of that meeting had never been disclosed.

The time had come for Jeht to confront Headmaster Qel-Bertuk and seek some "disclosure" of his own. He wasn't sure Lanius would be forthcoming, but he knew how he'd get what he wanted.

By any means necessary.

Cularin Emergency Announcement

This signal feed comes over every official Holonet source out of Coruscant and is seen all over the Republic. Transmission quality is less than perfect in many places, but the message is clear enough to be understood.

[Image of a dignified and attractive Human woman, mid-thirties by apparent age, dressed in a dark jacket. Her expression is very serious, as is her tone.]

"Citizens of the Republic and fellow Senators, it is with a heavy heart that I file this motion in absentia, but circumstances do not allow otherwise. Effective from this moment on, the Cularin system respectfully withdraws from the Republic and establishes itself as a sovereign system with no ties to any larger governmental body.

"I would like to make it clear that we are neither joining nor have any interest in joining the Separatist movement currently at war with the Republic. We also do not wish to influence any other system's decision on whether they can bear the oppression of that continuing war and its constant erosion of our rights and freed --"

The transmission ends before its conclusion. While the motion could not be denied or rebuked after its announcement, however unorthodox, the Grand Chancellor was swift to ban all further Holonet transmissions of Senate meetings as a matter of Republic security.

Dark Shadows

He looked over the datapad one last time, just to be sure. The coordinates came back from his navigational computer, confirming the destination spelled out in his briefing. He wanted it to be a mistake, but there was no denying the truth. These were his orders, straight from the Office of the Supreme Chancellor himself.

Though the war was technically under the command of the Jedi Council on Coruscant, missions were coming out of the Chancellor's office with increasing frequency. Darrus Jeht would have questioned such a turn of events if the Chancellor's directives had not always been so accurate and effective. Palpatine had a good mind for war, it seemed, and his insight was proving invaluable.

Still, this new mission was . . . dangerous. No, more than that -- it was completely unorthodox. The target planet was not a military base or garrison, but a mining and resource world deep in the heart of Secessionist territory. Corlax 4 had a population of more than 300 million, all laborers and their families.

The mission commands were very clear. Penetrate the system's defense fleet, bombard Corlax 4, and destroy its orbital processing facilities. Then, if enough firepower remained after the planet's scouring, destroy the defense fleet and leave nothing alive in the entire system. It was intended as a message to Count Dooku and his allies: The Republic will destroy your means of waging war until you no longer can.

Jeht understood its intent, but he also saw its implications. It was another war crime and this time, he would have to do it intentionally -- kill 300 million civilians doing nothing worse than trying to earn a living in a galaxy torn apart by war. The Chancellor's reasons for this strike were logical, and Jeht knew why it had to happen, but that didn't make the death of another planet full of innocents any easier.

He dropped the datapad in its recharger and looked around the bridge. It was late in the shift rotations, and only one other officer was present. With a deep sigh, he gave the command. "Helmsman, set course for the Corlax system. Plot a trajectory that takes us as far outside Secessionist patrols as possible."

The navigation officer snapped to attention and started working over his controls. "Right away, sir!"

Darrus closed his eyes and tried not to remember what he was certain to recall -- the feeling of all those souls on Kromol, wiped out by his hand. The pain of their deaths was still with him, lying in wait to ambush him. He had stopped sleeping; the nightmares were too vivid, too intense. Instead, Force meditation sufficed to keep him going. It was not as good as real rest, but he wasn't going to be getting any of that any time soon.

With an off-handed statement to the nav officer about keeping things on course, he stepped off the bridge and into his private conference room. A small chamber paneled in orbital steel, it had only a small table, a communications screen, and four chairs. More exhausted than he cared to admit, Darrus slumped into one of them and laid his head down on his arms.

Meditation or not, sleep found him there. No sooner was he unconscious than the events of the terrible night flooded back into his mind. He saw the dark ship lifting off the planet's surface, relived giving the order to fire all weapons, and watched helplessly as the vessel detonated and sent shockwaves across Kromol's surface. More than a billion dead, roasted alive by protonic fire or suffocated as their world's atmosphere boiled away. All his fault.

All his fault . . .

He lurched up out of his night terror, roused not by its horror but by an insistent buzz on the table's comm array. Regaining his senses, the Jedi tapped the accept button. "Yes? What is it?"

"Sir, there's an incoming transmission, coded with an inscription key."

He shook his head, trying to clear it. "What's the key, trooper?"

The clone soldier replied, "*Untaire*, sir. Just the one word. Vocal patterns show that you have to speak it or the signal will not decrypt."

Darrus allowed himself a small smile. He hadn't heard from Trilinae in weeks, now going on months, and he missed her a great deal. "Send it in here, trooper, and engage privacy mode on the conference room."

"Right away, sir."

He leaned back, running one hand through his long black hair in a vain attempt to look more presentable. When the array showed a queued signal, he spoke Tril's last name, Untaire, and the transmission unlocked. On the screen, a familiar face appeared. It was such a welcome sight, Darrus almost slumped again just from relief.

"Tril, it's so good to --"

The Corellian woman shook her head and frowned. "Wrong twin, dark eyes. It's Milinae, and you look like the south end of a Gundark."

Darrus looked down, sighing to himself. He adored Mil, but she wasn't who he wanted to talk to right now. More than anything, he needed to hear Trilinae's voice and talk to her about everything that was happening. She just had a way of putting everything in perspective.

"Hello? Dar? You asleep on me?"

He sat up straight, obviously more exhausted than he'd thought. "Sorry, Mil. What do you need, and why are you comming me on an encrypted signal?"

The pretty smuggler rolled her eyes. "You don't get out much, do you? Cularin's gone independent, and you're the Captain of a Republic battle cruiser. If I used an open comm signal, it would be intercepted for 'security reasons'."

Darrus nodded. "Of course it would, and it probably should. My work out here is very sensitive, Mil. We can't afford to have security compromised in any way."

With typical Untaire loathing for authority, Milinae stuck out her tongue. "Blah blah blah, whatever. Look, dark eyes, I'm comming you because one, you always get yourself into trouble when you're this quiet for this long, and two . . ." She paused, obviously worried. "Trill's missing."

Suddenly, Darrus Jeht was completely awake. "What? How? When?"

"Calm down, Jedi." She flashed him a teasing smile. "Can't have you going all dark on us, now. Look, she was flying back to Cularin when her ship got caught by some, um, *friends* of ours." She waved her hand dismissively. "Don't worry. She dusted them all, but her ship got shot up in the process."

Darrus was not calmed in the slightest. "Is she hurt?" He was already plotting courses in his mind to the Cularin system. At this ship's fastest speed, he could get there in . . .

Milinae shrugged. "I don't think so. Your bodyguard squad was there to pull her out of the ship, but now they've all gone missing. Mar'ek, sis, their whole fragging shuttle." Mil made a little pout, an expression he would find adorable under any other circumstances. "Even R-0 can't find them."

Jeht immediately relaxed. "Not to worry then, Mil. I'm tracking the shuttle. They made contact yesterday, and they're on their way to rendezvous with me now." He punched the ship's bridge intercom button and gave orders to belay heading to the Corlax system. "We can wait for them here before heading out."

Milinae nodded. "Well, that's good. I've got something else to ask, Jeht, if you'll listen."

He was a little alarmed at how conspiratorial her tone had become. "You know I'll always hear you out, Mil."

She looked down, then to her left as if listening to someone else he couldn't see. After a few moments, she turned back to the comm. "Darrus, there's a lot going on here on Cularin. We could really use some help, and the Republic's pulled out. Smugglers -- not the good kind, like me -- are making life hard on everyone, and something . . .

She trailed off, as if hesitant to talk about what was really worrying her. He waited for almost a minute before breaking the silence. "Mil, what is it?"

She took a deep breath. "It's Almas, Jeht. Almas is -- gone. Everyone there is dead, Darrus. I'm . . . I'm sorry to be the one to tell you."

He stared at the screen for a moment. His last mission had come as he was en

route to Almas to get some answers about his past. He'd chosen to do his duty to the Council. Because of that, he wasn't there when they needed him most.

"Darrus, are you all right?"

He stood up, his tone cold and steady. "No, Mil. I'm not. But I will be. I'll be there as soon as I can." With that, before she could even answer, he switched off the comm and strode purposefully out of the room.

"Helmsman, scrap the last course. I want an intercept course for the *Maelstrom*'s shuttle laid in and engaged immediately. Once we've picked them up, best possible speed to the Cularin system."

The navigator looked up at him curiously. "Cularin, sir? But that system is not a Repub --" He stopped speaking as Darrus' black eyes fixed on him with a glimmer of quiet hostility.

"Was my order unclear, trooper?"

"No, sir! Intercept course right away, sir!"

Darrus sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers in front of his face. He was breaking his orders now, something the Chancellor would probably take as a personal offense. He would have to apologize later, if he was given the chance. Some things were just more important. He had to make a stand somewhere, make a choice.

If he had to choose between protecting his home and murdering civilians, he knew where his loyalties rested. For the first time in his life, Darrus Jeht had to disobey.

* * * * *

Four hours later, on the bridge of the *Squall*, the *Maelstrom*'s combat shuttle, the ARC Trooper Mar'ek and his second in command took a private communication of their own. From a small holoprojector clutched in Mar'ek's armored right hand, a hooded figure glowed in cascades of blue light.

"The time has come. Execute Order 66." That was all the figure had to say, though the ARC Trooper thought he detected a certain hesitation, even regret, in the man's voice. Regardless, the word had been given. There was no turning

back now.

One Minute to Midnight

Darrus stepped out of the lift and took a moment to check his appearance. He'd been chided too many times by Mar'ek about how he presented himself around the ship to greet the returning ARC Trooper looking anything but his best. He'd caught a quick nap, showered, and even had his armor and robes repaired. His hair was pulled back in his typical fashion, loose and held in a silver-accented band.

His lightsaber rested on his hip, as did the custom blaster he'd received as a gift from his friend, Aayla. "Someday," she'd teased him when she gave him the weapon, "when you are as good a Jedi as me, you won't need this." He smiled at the memory, wondering for a moment how she fared on Felucia.

With a spring in his step that had been missing for many months, he hurried to the *Maelstrom*'s landing bay. His personal guard didn't like to be kept waiting and, to be honest, he'd feel better after talking with them about his decision to return to Cularin. They didn't have to know about his orders to the contrary, of course, but he didn't like lying to them. He hoped that when he explained his reasons, they would support his choice. If not --

Well, he'd drive that speeder when he came to it. If he had to, he could always take the *Legacy* and leave the *Maelstrom* to complete the mission he couldn't bring himself to perform. The clones, he knew, would do what they were asked; it was a realization that he'd never dwelled on before now, but it was no less true for his ignorance.

The clones would follow orders, no matter what. If the Council or the Chancellor commanded them to barrage a civilian population center, they would do it without hesitation. He wanted to believe that at least Mar'ek and his fellow ARC Troopers would have more autonomy, but he couldn't really be sure. Even the Advanced Reconnaissance Commandos were clones, and there was no telling what programming had gone into their forced learning regimens.

He passed his transport as he crossed the primary hanger. The lift to the shuttle bays was on the other side of the huge chamber, so even at his brisk pace, he was in for quite a walk. He didn't mind; for the first time in a long

while, he felt at peace. He was making the right decision, even though his long-ingrained sense of duty told him he was wrong.

He shrugged off the doubt, affectionately stroked the side panel of the *Legacy's* cockpit as he passed it, and pressed the button on his wrist communicator. "Bridge, is the shuttle safely aboard?"

The voice of his navigations officer replied. "Yes, sir."

He smiled to himself. "Good. Close all outer doors and set course for Cularin. I want best possible speed to the system."

"Understood. Sir?"

Jeht frowned at the glowing bracelet, hoping his men weren't going to start questioning him already. "Yes, trooper?"

"There was an intermittent signal a few moments ago. It read like a capital ship contact, but we lost it from our scopes. It was pretty distant, but it was definitely --"

"If it's not attacking us, soldier, ignore it." Darrus sighed. The clone troopers were efficient to a fault, and he had more important things to worry about, like going home. "It's probably a Separatist scout ship. Just make the jump to hyperspace, and leave it in our stellar dust."

"Right away, sir. But there is the possibility that it will be able to track us if we jump so close to it, sir."

He shook his head, amazed at his crew's concern with minutiae. "Being tracked does not concern me, trooper. Where we're going, a single ship wouldn't dare follow. Just make the jump; am I clear?"

The officer's reply was instantaneous. "Crystal, sir!"

Chuckling softly to himself, Darrus reached the lift and opened it, stepping inside with a sweep of his charcoal grey robes. At least the clone troopers' adherence to orders still worked in his favor, but that would change if they received commands from higher up the chain of command. That worried him; he'd have to do something about that if he ever hoped to reach Cularin with a loyal crew. He hated to do it, but he just might have to --

"Sir?" His wrist comm blared again.

"What is it, soldier?"

"There is a transmission from Coruscant, sir. Priority One. Origin point is the Jedi Council Hall."

Darrus winced slightly. He'd been afraid of this. Somehow, the Council had already heard that he'd defied orders. "Route the signal to my quarters; I'll take it after greeting my entourage in the shuttle bay."

"Of course, sir. Bridge out."

No choice now. He touched another button on his wrist comm and sent a tight, encoded signal to his astromech. The message was a simple one -- the ship's communications network needed to have an immediate, unfortunate systems failure, preferably one that would take days to fix. As much as the droid loved to fix things, it seemed far more adept at breaking them, anyway.

By the time his elevator reached the secondary hangar bays, the carrier light on his wrist communicator was dark. That meant the ship's entire array was offline.

As he reached for the button to open the lift doors, he was hit by a sudden, powerful wave of mental trauma. Pain, anguish, and a terrible shock flooded his awareness, driving him to his armored knees. He reeled, barely catching himself on the lift's rail bar, as the Force tore through his defenses and engulfed him in the dark waters of death.

But not his own. He struggled to clear his mind, to clear his inner vision. There was such pain, such horrible loss. He could see . . . birds? Foliage of bright hues and exotic forms. A jungle paradise. But the images quickly faded as he sensed the stink of burned flesh and ozone.

It was Felucia. It was Aayla! He could feel her pain; he was feeling her die! "No!" he screamed into the confines of the lift car, with no one to hear his grief. He desperately clung to the last moments of her mind, her fading life, as a drowning man would clutch at burning driftwood. In her last heartbeat, Darrus saw white-booted feet and the blaze of blasters. He saw, in that final second, his sweet friend's killers.

* * * * *

When the lift doors opened, Mar'ek and his men fired enough rounds from their heavy DC-15 rifles to drop a charging Rancor. As the incandescent glare of their devastating salvo faded, they could see that their target was --

Gone. Nowhere to be seen. The back panel of the lift was a slagged wreck, most of its framework warped by the energy discharge, but there was no body, no ashes, no trace of their quarry. Mar'ek gestured silently for one of his men to advance on the lift and check the blind spots on either side of its sliding door.

The clone soldier advanced, weapon raised, and quickly pivoted left and then right as he reached the opening. "Nothing, sir. Car's clear."

A second later, his helmet exploded forward in a shower of purple radiance as a lightsaber arced through it from above. Darrus dropped from his position against the roof of the lift and fell in a crouch behind the now-headless trooper. Mar'ek shouted for his squad to open fire, but the dead clone's body absorbed the wave of incoming bolts.

Then he was on them, leaping impossibly high out of the glowing doorway to avoid their rapid barrage. Mar'ek was the only one fast enough to track Darrus with his weapon, but even his battle-sharpened reflexes could not catch the blur that descended on his squad in a tempest of violet rage.

Diving to avoid the Jedi's attacks, Mar'ek rolled clear of the fray and rose to a kneeling position, rifle raised to take advantage of Master Jeht's preoccupation with cutting his men apart. Limbs and armor flew in all directions as each of the elite troopers fell to Darrus's blade. As the last one dropped, cleaved in half from right shoulder to left hip, the ARC Trooper seized his one and only chance to fire.

He squeezed the DC-15's trigger, but nothing happened. The last three inches of his rifle's barrel had been shorn through, the victim of Master's Jeht's first swing. As quickly as he could, Mar'ek threw the gun aside and reached for his pistols. He brought them to bear as his back hit the hangar bay wall, but he had nothing to aim at. The Jedi was gone.

His weapon, on the other hand, reappeared instantly. A glowing curve of violet, the lightsaber flew through the air and collided with the ARC Trooper's

guns. There was a dual spray of molten metal and the searing agony of an energy blade ablating away both his hands. Then, as Mar'ek collapsed in shock, he saw the burning sword reverse direction and fly back to its master's waiting grasp.

He tried to get up and fight, but the pain was too intense, his foe too swift. By the time Mar'ek could struggle to his feet, Darrus was already lifting him off the ground and smashing him into the plate steel behind him. He crumpled to the deck, rolling over nearly insensate as the Jedi Master reignited his lightsaber and brought its hissing point to his throat.

"Where is she?"

Mar'ek tried in vain to reach the other troopers on the ship, to call in backup. The *Maelstrom's* communications were down; he was on his own. If he'd had even a single finger left, he would have pressed the release on the grenades at his belt and taken the Jedi with him, but that was not an option.

Darrus made a gesture with his free hand and the ARC Trooper's helmet tore free, hurtling through the air to shatter against the airlock doors a dozen meters away. He pressed his blade forward until Mar'ek felt its searing heat. "Where *is* she?"

With a derisive spit, Mar'ek glared up at his former commander. "Dead, just like you'll be soon. You and your whole Order!" It was a lie; he'd marooned Trilinae on a remote world much against her will so she would be safe. He just didn't want to give Darrus the satisfaction of knowing she was alive.

He was defenseless and no longer a threat; the Jedi Code meant he'd be taken prisoner now. Humiliating, but acceptable. Later, when he was released and his hands replaced, he could go back and rescue her. After the war, after the Jedi and the Republic were gone. She would see that he'd saved her life, and together, they could --

* * * * *

Darrus pulled his lightsaber out of the ruined hole that was his former friend's face. He felt nothing as he walked away from the murder, using the Force to gather the remnants of his bodyguard squad and throw them into the airlock. He sent them into the dark reaches of space without so much as a single tear.

She was dead. Aayla was dead. Now, inside, so was he.

There was nothing left but to go back and do what he promised. He no longer really cared, but inertia would have to carry him where emotion once had.

Cularin. He'd return to Cularin.

What else was there?

Last Stand

There comes a moment when the line between a heroic life and an ordinary life comes down to a single decision. To one second in which action or inaction determines where the hand of fate will fall. Many seek to be champions for reasons of their own, but more often than not, the true measure of a hero lies in what he does between one tick of the doomsday clock and the next.

Tragically, most true heroes do not survive a third second slipping by.

"Bring us in close," he ordered to his bridge crew. "Keep weapons on cold fire; I don't want an energy spike giving away our location."

There was silence all around him, but in keeping with their skills and training, the troopers manned their stations and followed his commands. Even so, one voiced the reservations they all felt. "Sir, those are our ships out there. Won't an unprovoked attack on them be considered treason?"

Darrus Jeht sighed inwardly as the clone commander's voice echoed his own feelings. Still, there was no turning back now. In the time it had taken them to travel from the outer edge of the system to this point within the orbit of Almas, the *Maelstrom*'s sensors had picked up two Republic cruisers gunning down seven starships. While his crew certainly saw those actions as combating Separatist sympathies in the Cularin system, Jeht knew better. Each ship had been harboring Jedi, users of the Force fleeing a galaxy-wide pogrom against their kind.

His crew would have known this if the *Maelstrom*'s communications hadn't been down when the order was given from Coruscant. Even then they would have received word by now if Darrus's astromech had not been keeping that

communications failure going by "unorthodox" repair techniques. These stalling tactics would not keep his crew in the dark permanently, but somehow Darrus did not think it would be a problem for much longer.

His mind back on the present, Master Jeht nodded to the clone trooper questioning his order. "I have reason to believe those ships have been taken over by the enemy. Since we cannot get word to or from home base, I have to go with my instincts." Then, knowing how much clones relied on discipline, he added. "Do you have a problem with your orders, soldier?"

"Sir, no sir!" The helmsman sat back down and plotted a course that would bring them into formation between the two other cruisers. Jeht noted their call signs on the tactical display -- the *Undaunted* and the *Primal*, two gunships with just as much firepower as his own. Taking them out would require finesse.

Finesse and treachery. With both ships turning to face the *Maelstrom*, Jeht sent them a short-range signal, advising them that he had orders to penetrate the system and hunt down current targets through the inner orbital rings. It was a lie, but it was just the kind of thing he thought their captains would be expecting. Sure enough, the ships parted and allowed him to pass between them without incident.

As soon as his ship was in position, Darrus struck. Before any of his crew could question why enemy-held vessels would be so accommodating of the *Maelstrom*, he transferred firing controls to his station and unleashed a barrage off both broadsides. Without powering the guns up fully or locking onto targets, his attack was far less accurate or lethal than he had been hoping. Most of the laser fire slammed into raised shields or missed completely. Only a few telling hits were scored, mostly in the last few moments of the volley.

Even so, the surprise hits were effective enough. The *Undaunted* blossomed plasma along its engine decks and listed violently away from the *Maelstrom*. The *Primal* was not as badly hit, but its weapons array went cold and dark, unable to return fire. "Scramble all fighters!" Jeht's order was carried out instantly and a second later, hangar doors opened all along his gunship.

Now came the true deception, one he could not have instigated without his astromech's clever help. Darrus had always been more than a little worried about R-0's tendency for deceit, but at this moment, he could not have been more grateful for it. Using the communications array the rest of his vessel

thought to be offline, he began blanketing space with a complex pattern of binary control signals. The clever little droid had even told him that the ruse would be easy because, for some reason, the ship's sensors were already rigged to be bypassed.

By themselves, the false signals did nothing, but they were just strong enough to be picked up by the sensors of the cruisers and their fighters. If this worked, he would know within moments when --

"Sir! We are picking up telemetry data, Separatist coding. They could be command transmissions."

Jeht nodded quietly, letting the comment hang in the air for a moment. He knew that the best deception was one its targets created for themselves. In this case, he was counting on the efficiency of the clone troopers to weave a deceit better than any he could craft on his own.

"Sir, they are controlling those fighters with battle droid pilots!"

He nodded again, both pleased with himself that the ruse was working and disgusted with himself that it was necessary at all. These were good men, as were the pilots he'd just sent out -- pilots he did not intend to take back aboard. "Understood, commander. Is there any risk of those signals --

On cue, three levels above the bridge, R-0 forced the *Maelstrom's* communication array to begin broadcasting a wide-range jamming tone. "Sir! There's a disruption field going active. The source is our ship!" Jeht waited for the inevitable, logical conclusion. "Sir, the enemy vessels are taking control of the *Maelstrom's* systems!"

Darrus made himself frown; with the way he was feeling, it was not difficult. "I understand, commander. Lock out all external communications and bring down the primary array. We can't risk falling into Separatist hands."

The order was followed instantly; no one asked what would befall the now cut-off pilots outside. Without orders or communications, they would be flying blind and likely destroyed by the enemy. There was no other alternative, so the clones did their duty and completed their orders. If Darrus had not been so preoccupied with his own guilt at manipulating his men, he would have marveled at their efficiency.

Now came the hard part. With sensors on passive only and no communications, the *Maelstrom* would be unable to identify the other two cruisers as anything but what Jeht had called them -- ships under enemy control. This would leave its crew free to fight without concern for the Republic or their fellow soldiers. If Darrus was to survive a battle with two Republic capital ships, he would need his crew in top fighting form.

As if in answer to his thoughts, the bridge rocked beneath him, sending several clones sprawling to the deck. "Control surface hit on the starboard side, sir! It is not critical, but shields there are failing."

"Understood, lieutenant. Bring us around to bearing 10 mark 4 and fire our main guns at the *Undaunted* before she can recover. Target her engines." The order was carried out swiftly, and as the *Maelstrom* fired a burning twin pulse of red light, Darrus could see the fireball it created in the *Undaunted's* thruster pairing burn away the ship's ability to fly or enter hyperspace. A second later, the fires spread inward and tore the vessel apart. In one salvo, he had cut his opposition in half.

Unfortunately, the other half was still capable of fighting back. Another hit shook his vessel as the *Primal* reminded him that she had gotten her main lasers back online. This time, the damage was to the port main thruster. Still functional, it was no longer at top output. That would limit his speed, but Darrus had a feeling that one way or another, leaving Cularin would not be a concern for him.

Still, the *Primal* had just made it impossible for him to turn or chase with enough speed to get her in his sights. If this were a dogfight, he would probably be done for. Even now, all of his fighters would be closing to engage the *Primal* at close range, diving, spiraling, and risking their lives to land any shot they could.

Hmmm, he thought -- a dogfight indeed.

"Kill all engines, fire all stabilizers at 80 percent, and overburn the bow landing thrusters. Do it now!" Without meaning to, Jeht touched on the Force and drove his command into the minds of all present. Even faster than they would have, the clone troopers complied. The *Maelstrom* trembled violently as numerous bulkheads shook loose and support structures buckled under the stress of the sudden stop. Impressed that she held together even that well, Jeht waited the fraction of a second it took for the thrusters in his cruiser's

nose to fire.

Intended for slowing duties when the *Maelstrom* made its infrequent landings, the bow thrusters were never designed to be used in space. The effect of doing so was not something the crew could have anticipated, but it was exactly what Jeht had counted on -- the vessel flipped over while still moving forward at a crawl. He could hear the metal in his ship scream in protest, but she held together. No matter what he did to her, she was holding together.

And now facing a very surprised *Primal*. "Fire all forward guns, full power! We only get one shot!" The dark space between the *Maelstrom* and her prey lit up like a thousand streaking suns. The light boiled away the cruiser's main shields and deck plating instantly. The *Primal*'s superstructure glowed for a moment then disappeared in an explosion that blinded the *Maelstrom*'s sensors.

For several heartbeats, nothing existed but the painful white of the forward screen and the dawning realization that he was still alive. Darrus quickly leaped out of his chair and dashed over to the sensor logs. Even on passive, the *Maelstrom*'s arrays were state of the art. The only flaw in his ruse would be if pilots came back and reported other clone troopers in the fighters they engaged. To both his relief and his chagrin, the detonation of the *Primal* had completely devastated his own craft. By attacking so swiftly and surprisingly, he had managed to wipe out both sides. He was alive and victorious. He desperately wanted go somewhere quiet to be ill.

The end of the battle was also R-0's signal to cancel his interference with the *Maelstrom*'s sensor arrays. The "droid transmissions" ended, and any trace of the false signal was purged from ship's records. There was no need to continue the ruse.

What needed to happen next was unavoidable. Darrus hated to do it, but he realized that he could not keep fooling these men indefinitely. Sooner or later, one of them would get a signal through to Coruscant. As soon as they did, his life expectancy would be measured in moments.

He placed his hand on his wrist, finger over one of the code buttons of his communicator. Pressing it would send a command to R-0 that went against everything he believed in -- the silent activation of the *Maelstrom*'s self-destruct. He considered going down with the ship himself, but he knew there was still a job to do here. There were still Jedi and other Force-users to protect. If there were not, he would have happily sat in his chair and disappeared into

oblivion alongside his loyal troops.

He walked calmly toward the rear bridge exit. "Commander, you have the bridge. There's a lot of debris out there. While Engineering tries to repair our damaged engine, I'll go out in the *Legacy* and look for survivors. Just keep her steady and wait for --"

"Sir, long range sensors have picked up another large ship entering the system!"

Jeht stopped, turning to face the trooper. "Do you have a fix on its type?" This was not at all in the plan. Coruscant could not have known that he would be here and certainly did not have the manpower to send another cruiser so swiftly. Neither the *Primal* nor the *Undaunted* had been able to transmit during the battle, so there could have been no warning. In any case, reinforcements would have been hours away.

Jeht took his finger away from the destruct button and stared at the sensor screens again. "What am I looking at?"

He asked the question, but one glance gave him all the answers he needed. The incoming vessel was something out of his nightmares, a ship he had seen destroyed with his own eyes, with eyes that had witnessed the deaths of innocent millions at the same time. "It's impossible, sir, but our sensors indicate that it's the --"

"The *Shadowblade*." He finished the dumbfounded trooper's sentence. Somehow, the Separatist superweapon had survived and was here, now. Jeht blinked once and set aside his shock. It would only serve the *Shadowblade*'s masters, and he had no time for panic. "Commander, does this ship match the sensor ghost we picked up when we entered hyperspace to come here?"

After a few seconds, "Yes, sir. Target vessel is a perfect match."

How? His mind searched frantically for an answer even as he ordered the *Maelstrom* around for an intercept course. Then it hit him. "The ship had already been rigged for fake signals." The destruction of the *Shadowblade* had been a lie. For all he knew, the ship had been in orbit or even in hyperspace long before his bombardment reached the ground. All those people, killed for nothing.

"Sir, with Engine One crippled, we'll never make it to the target before it passes through the system's asteroid field."

So the *Maelstrom* was not its target? Then what was? "Commander, course estimate on the enemy vessel. Quickly!"

To their credit, his people moved fast. "Vessel is heading for the system's primary planet at impressive speed. Projected time of transit is 28 minutes to the asteroid belt, 10 minutes to cross it, and 22 minutes to arrival at the destination."

Jeht cursed silently. That *was* fast, faster than his ship could go at present. There was no way to catch it before it slipped into the Belt. He grimly thought that the universe did not like him enough to have the *Shadowblade* hit by an asteroid. The only luck he ever had was bad. Used for years by the Chancellor, lied to by the Council, his beloved slain by someone he trusted like a brother . . .

The clone commander's voice shook him out the dark spiral. "Sir, sensors indicate the enemy vessel is heavily shielded. Firing our main guns after your reversal has shattered their cores. It will take days to repair them."

Again, Jeht knew what the man was going to say. "We don't have anything capable of bringing it down?"

The trooper just nodded. Well, that tore it. Jeht had been certain he would never leave Cularin again. Now he knew why. "Commander, plot an intercept course using 120 percent burn on the engines." He looked at the clone with darkly shadowed eyes. "And by intercept, I mean ram."

The crew did not hesitate more than a moment before fulfilling his orders. Jeht could hear the ship complain as its engines began to burn far hotter than they were ever meant to do. Metal stress groans echoed through every deck, but as always, the ship stayed together and did as she was told. The ship's damaged thruster was spraying molten steel and plasma fumes like a Podracer. If it did not explode and take the *Maelstrom* with it, they might all survive just long enough to smash into the *Shadowblade*. In a strange way, Darrus found that a comforting thought.

The minutes crawled by, every second counting down toward the end. Jeht watched the *Shadowblade*'s sensor signature loom closer despite its

impressive cloaking suite. Ironically, if the *Maelstrom* had not been calibrated to falsely read the enemy ship in the first place, her sensors would never have picked it up this time. He noted sardonically that Palpatine had never intended for him to be here again. He was all too happy to disappoint.

"Sir, we'll reach the asteroid belt in 10 seconds on my mark." The commander watched his screens, adding stoically, "Mark." Darrus knew why the clone was bothering to say anything at all. He had not given his crew any order to slow down or raise shields before entering the field. The commander and likely everyone else on the bridge were worried they would smash into the first asteroid that crossed their path, especially at these speeds.

The key, of course, was that an asteroid would not be crossing the *Maelstrom's* path at all. Darrus had spent a lot of time in this belt when he was assigned to the system. Cularin's resident crime boss, an honorable man by nature, had given him several hidden lanes of approach to the Belt, and Darrus was using one of them right now. At this speed and trajectory, the ship would not encounter a single rock of any appreciable size. His five years of service in this system had to be good for something after all.

Darrus checked himself and realized -- his *fifteen* years. He had been caught in the same temporal field as everyone else in the Cularin system, catapulted ten years into the future through the terrible powers of the Darkstaff. Even now, vast bands of glowing energy were still tearing their way through the belt, subjecting everything they touched to the destructive waves of time.

Darrus quietly touched a send button on his wrist communicator and murmured into it. "R-0, it's time for you to go. Take the *Legacy* and get out of here while you can. Go find Millinae and bring her the ship. Maybe with you beside her, she won't be able to ruin this one." There was an angry string of protesting beeps, but Darrus was in no mood to argue. "Dammit it, R-0, there's no need for you to be here. Let me at least save one person, even if it's a droid."

As the whine of mechanized ire pealed again over his wrist comm, Jeht turned it off. He trusted in the precocious little robot's sense of self-preservation to override its indignation. Once it calmed down, Darrus had no doubt that R-0 would be in the *Legacy* as fast as its servos could roll. Secretly, he had always been fond of R-0, and with the droid being the only piece of Trillinae left, he felt a certain peace at the thought that it would survive.

"Sir, the enemy ship is about to emerge from the far side of the belt. We'll lose sensor contact with it for a few seconds afterward, but we should be able to catch it before it reaches Cularin."

Darrus furrowed his brow, night-black eyes narrowing. "Explain, commander. Why will we lose sensor lock?"

"Sir, there's an energy pattern moving across our trajectory. It doesn't match any known pattern, but it is fairly small and should be out of our way before it poses a threat." The clone paused after that, obviously expecting some kind of orders.

Energy pattern. The time rifts, Darrus thought. He was worried that if they lost sensor contact with the *Shadowblade*, its cloaking fields might keep it hidden thereafter. He knew where it was going, of course, but it could still cause massive damage before he found it again. Blast the Darkstaff and all its woes! If it helped the *Shadowblade* escape him, he'd . . .

The anger served no purpose. As quickly as it rose, Darrus sent it back down. Control was needed here, not frenzy. He reached inward, trying to find the calm in the heart of his spiritual chaos. "The eye of the Force storm," his mentor once called it. "Steady as she goes, commander," he said in a placid tone. "Steady as she -- wait!"

The storm erupted again but not in a destructive way. "Lock on to the *Shadowblade* and fire every torpedo bay we have at her!"

"Sir, as I said before, we don't have a chance of denting --" Darrus cut the clone a withering gaze so dark that the man physically staggered. "I mean, right away sir!" Slumping into the gunnery seat, the clone commander brought up firing solutions. Hesitantly, he spoke again. "Sir, the ship's cloak is breaking our lock. We can't target her effectively."

Darrus nodded; he had expected that. "Then flood and charge all tubes. Dumb fire everything we've got, commander."

A hundred streaks raced out of the *Maelstrom* and surged through the dark toward the enemy ship. Sleek and angular, the *Shadowblade* looked like its name. A cragged knife of black panels and shielded thruster points, it resembled nothing so much as a bladed talon slicing its way through the stars. All around it, tiny explosions tore apart stray asteroids and impacted

harmlessly along its defenses. Nothing penetrated its ebon depths but the detonations got its attention.

That was exactly what Darrus wanted. The deadly ship turned with impossible grace and slashed through space as it reversed course. Master Jeht had been banking that the ship wanted no witnesses to its mission here, which meant that it would have to destroy the *Maelstrom* before it could move on to Cularin. With luck, this would give him the opening he needed to bring the dire vessel down.

"Sir, the enemy ship is changing course to intercept us."

"Put our respective trajectories on screen. I need a surrounding map as well; show me any energy disturbances." As soon as he said it, the order was completed. He was staring at a full three-dimensional map of the local asteroids. A glowing swath of iridescent violet represented the time rift, dead ahead. It was nearly moving to block the *Maelstrom's* path, but at its current speed, it would be out of the clear asteroid lane within a few seconds.

That would never do; he needed that vortex right where it was. "Commander, change course. Scan the temporal disturbance for its weakest point. Set our path for that spot and don't stray even a meter. We have to hit it precisely at its center or we'll be torn apart."

In truth, there were other safe zones as well, but Darrus did not have time to go into that with the clone commander. Every rift tended to have pockets of relatively stable time energy. He did not know how the science behind it worked, but he knew that there were places in each field where asteroids could drift in, disappear, and drift back out days, weeks or months later without suffering any apparent harm. They were impossible to predict and since they sometimes never released their temporal prisoners at all, they were too risky to use. No, the storm's eye was their only chance.

"I want every available generator powered up and shunted to the forward battery." Before his dutiful commander could voice his concern, Darrus added, "I know the main guns are down. They aren't the only things up there."

The next few moments were a nightmare. The *Shadowblade* was much faster than Jeht had planned on, closing the distance between them in less than half the time he'd hoped. A trio of black steel panels opened along the *Shadowblade's* edged nose, revealing turbolaser batteries. Without shields, the

Maelstrom took a severe beating from its first volley. Deck plates ruptured and the hull took deeply piercing hits along every forward deck. The ship's status panel showed multiple internal fires, but Darrus paid them no heed. None of them mattered. There was nothing he could do, in any case.

Urging his vessel forward, Jeht watched the *Shadowblade* for any sign of weakness. He was hoping, praying to anything that might hear him for just one lucky break. All he needed was to be right about one thing, to have one suspicion proven right. As the dark blade powered up to fire again, his wish was granted.

"There!" he shouted, pointing at the tactical screen. "The *Shadowblade's* cloaking field is weakest when it prepares its weapons! To lock onto us, it has to relax its jamming!" His exuberance was dimmed by the *Shadowblade's* next wave of attacks. A massive hole tore through the starboard "wing," venting seven decks into space along with all their occupants and equipment. Other damaged systems flashed over the captain's chair readout, each one just as ignored as before.

"Bow charge ready, commander?" He gestured to a control panel and looked knowingly at his second in charge. The clone nodded his understanding and took a seat. "On my signal, give the *Shadowblade* everything we've got."

The dark enemy swept around the *Maelstrom*, flying through the smoke and debris she was guttering to get a straight line of attack on her engines. Obviously looking for a quick kill, the *Shadowblade* opened every port on her hull -- dozens of glowing apertures all poised to end this engagement as violently as possible.

Darrus waited, holding his breath, as the sensor-blocking field around the vile superweapon dwindled to its lowest point yet. That many guns needed a lot of firing solutions, sensor traffic he could use to guide his own attack . . . of sorts. "Now!"

The dorsal array near the nose of the *Maelstrom* spun around, grinding on half-damaged actuators to do so. It opened up with a scintillating gray beam nearly invisible to the eye but very noticeable in its effect. The *Shadowblade* jerked momentarily out of control, caught in an overcharged tractor beam so powerful that it could not immediately break free. Forced sideways, it towed behind the massive cruiser like flotsam caught in its wake.

"We can't hold her long, sir."

"We don't have to." Then, with a sigh of regret and resignation, "Helm, .03 degrees starboard."

"That takes out of the safe path, sir."

"I know."

And with that, both ships plunged into the chaotic rift, disappearing in the flaring light of time.

Farewell

The galaxy has changed. The Republic is no more. In its place, an Empire exists. The Jedi who live are being hunted. Peace has come -- not the kind of peace the galaxy has known for a thousand years, but peace all the same.

Yesterday, a holorecording was released to the media. The recording contains a message from the crimelord Nirama, apparently made some time ago.

Nirama's words . . . well, we will do as Cularin's media chose to do, and allow his words to speak for themselves.

Hello, Cularin. Many of you know me. For those whom I never met, who know me by reputation alone, I am Nirama. I was a citizen of Cularin. I held other roles and titles as well, but the one that I would have affixed to my name is simply that: citizen of Cularin.

If you are seeing this, I can only assume something unpleasant has happened to me. I am either gone from Cularin or gone from the galaxy. In either case, this message is difficult for me to record. There are many things I feel the need to say to the people of Cularin. About my time here. About what the people have meant to me.

When I came to Cularin, I did not know what to expect. I came because the opportunity was great, though coming was a gamble; I did not then, nor do I now, respect the Hutt. All Hutts do business one way, and that way is full of deceit. There are lies and there is treachery and there will always be a trail of

bodies where a Hutt has been. That I came with an organization whose membership I had begun to trust helped. Nadin Paal stood by me as we rose in power, stood by me still when the Cell arose. Others remained loyal. Still others did not.

This is not the time, nor the place, for me to reflect on the treachery of smugglers. We are, every one of us, treacherous in our way. It is known that I never lied; this is easy to do when people around you will hear whatever truth they wish to hear no matter what you say. Which is to say, I allowed people to believe things that were not true, because it was easier for business than correcting their misperceptions.

What I wish to discuss is what Cularin came to mean to me.

I saw when I came here that this is a system like no other in the galaxy. The people I met were independent, used to taking care of themselves. Some would call you reckless, you Culariners. Sometimes you were. You stepped in front of adherents of the dark side, you stared down the barrels of E-web blasters, you charged into the proverbial burning building to save the lives of those you had never met.

I had heard stories of heroes before. I had never thought to meet them. Certainly not so many. Certainly not in one place.

I remember some of my first interactions with the heroes of Cularin. Many of you were struggling to understand your identities. The notion of being a hero was yet fluid for you. Some of you called me Lord Nirama -- a term that has never been necessary. I am not royalty. Those that society deems crimelords are nothing but criminals of a higher rank. I recognized that I was a criminal, and that my ousting of the Hutt put me in a position of authority, but Lord Nirama never existed except as a convenient fiction, a way certain of my lieutenants tried to keep their underlings in line. "Lord Nirama" is more intimidating than "that three-armed, four-eyed, ex-accountant."

When next we met, I will admit to being in a place where I almost believed I could be Lord Nirama. I was cold. Savage. I ordered an execution in your presence, had it carried out on the moment.

Would it surprise you to learn that Lord Nirama saw the expressions on your faces in his dreams for months? That these were not pleasant dreams? It was not simply that my actions had offended -- it was that I had stepped beyond an

acceptable way of dealing with transgressors.

Not something I could say while I had my organization to run. Now, dead or just gone, I can say it. You, the heroes of Cularin, changed me. Your reactions to what I did changed me.

You would think that, with four eyes, I would see clearly. But it took your eyes to show me who – what -- I was becoming.

So I watched you. I listened to your holonet reports. I received reports of your activities. I watched as the citizens of Cularin began to take on new responsibilities. When the Cartel threatened, you were there. You never questioned the need to defend your homes. You defended them. The Believers? You fought them. The Wyrd? You refused to let them harm Cularin.

And Thaere. I watched the interactions with Thaere with a great deal of interest.

What had been happening, as I watched, was that I saw something in you. You feared -- you must have feared -- but that did not stop you from doing what was right. You showed me things I never thought to see. You showed me what it means to stand up for what you believe in, to fight even when the fight seems hopeless. You showed me that while the Jedi were named protectors of the galaxy all those years ago, the galaxy is not helpless. It has never been helpless. So when the fight came to Cularin, Cularin fought back.

This is why, when Thaere was attacked, my ships were among those defending Cularin. Whatever else could be said about me, about those in my employ, Cularin had become our home as well. But I do not know if I would have defended it at all, let alone so voraciously, if not for what I saw of you.

I repeat myself, I suppose, but the point is vital: I did not know what a hero was until I saw you fight for your homes. The galaxy is vast. There were thousands of paths each of you could have chosen.

But you chose to be heroes. You chose to put your lives in jeopardy for others. Some of you . . . some of you sacrificed your lives so that my people . . . my Oblee . . . could return to the galaxy. Return from the place to which they were banished by a tool of the dark side.

Even now, I cannot express what that sacrifice meant. I could never, would

never, have asked anyone to make that sacrifice. To die? To know you were going to die in an attempt to give life to someone you had never met? The people of a crimelord? Nothing I had done, no donation, no information, nothing could have possibly earned that. Which leads me to believe that it was not done for me. It was done because it was the right thing. It needed to be done. So the people of Cularin -- her heroes -- did it.

So many times I've seen this. You do not flee. You stand and fight. Some, who live in other places, have said to me, "Nirama, it is easy to fight when there are so many Jedi." But as noble as the Jedi have been, I believe Cularin would have fought without any Jedi at all. The Jedi were a finger to the body of Cularin. Her people are the backbone. The people who live in the jungles, on the platform cities, in the noisy floating communities of Genarius. Every star system I've ever seen has a backbone; nowhere else is that backbone made of thrice-tempered durasteel.

There are debts I owe to the heroes of Cularin that can never fully be repaid. I never dreamed, when I came to this system, that the stories of so many heroes would play out before my eyes. I never dreamed that I would let myself be drawn into your stories. I was ever the quiet one, the plain one, content to sit in the back and watch the galaxy spin on its axes. I worked to do what I could, to stay alive, never giving much thought to the right thing. The necessary thing.

These are the things I saw, watching you.

By allowing me to be part of the story of your heroism -- even a small part, a footnote that will be lost to history -- you made me a better individual.

Thank you, Cularin. Thank you for being heroes I never dreamed of seeing. Thank you for helping me to grow. Thank you for giving a cynical being like myself faith that when heroes are needed they will arise.

If I am no longer with you, please know that it makes me sad. I have grown more in the past few years, from each and every one of you, than you can possibly know. I will ever be with you in spirit -- the good part of my spirit, the part that learned from you and that in the end, I hope, lived up to the standard you set in some small way.

Farewell, Cularin. May the Force be with you.

Life According to Meelo

Dark times have come to Cularin, but not all light is drowned in the deepening shadows. There are still places on the lush green world where adversity is met by laughter, hardship is countered by strong friendships, and no amount of emotional turmoil is a match for the power of the Human (or alien) spirit.

In the streets of Gadrin, Cularin's largest city, there is a cantina called the Crosstown. It's a haven for the war-weary, a home away from home for those without one to begin with, and a rest stop for all manner of travelers and vagabonds. Trouble-makers rub elbows with politicians, and mercenaries match yarn-spinning skills with the most stoic of Jedi. All the while, the eclectic clientele prove one universal truth -- there is no tragedy so terrible that it cannot be chased away with good company and some cutthroat card playing . .

It was the bottom of her fourteenth hand, and Meelo was having trouble caring about much of anything any more. After playing that much sabacc, all she really wanted to do was crawl in a hole and nurse her wounded credit account. However, the prospect of quitting while losing for a Rodian is rather like being hit in the face repeatedly with a gaffi stick -- only not nearly as pleasant.

"So where was I?" she asked as eloquently as her tired mind could. Still, her rapt audience at the card table could make her out well enough.

It was a Bimm that finally answered, having puzzled through her sleepy words enough to understand the question. "You were telling us how you founded the Wookiee Liberation Front."

She stared at the speaker like he'd grown an extra limb. "Is that what I said?" For the life of her, she did not remember bringing up the topic. It was a sore subject for her; it was definitely not the kind of thing to talk about in mixed company -- or anywhere, really.

Everyone over at the bar nodded, save for a single robed figure seated at the end. He spoke up quietly, saying only, "Actually, she said she was there when

the Front was founded."

Meelo sighed; perhaps it was finally time to reveal the origins of the WOLF before things got any more out of hand. Trying to save face, she straightened up and tried to look noble. "Exactly. That's what I said."

The Bimm sighed and shot the robed Human a withering glare. "Hush! I want to hear the rest of this! WOLF has done a lot for my big furry cousins; I want to know who started the movement."

Meelo snorted, a rude sound that was only exacerbated by her exhaustion. "WOLF? Bah! Okay, okay . . . deal me into another hand, and I'll tell you everything."

A quick shuffle started round fifteen, and Meelo ordered a concoction of fruit juices and Tarasin plant extracts to jump start her neurons. It tasted like a stagnant pond scum, but it had the kick of four cups of caf. After a few minutes of gasping for breath and tearing up, she was ready to talk again.

"Okay . . . so there we were, sitting in this speeder and staring at the Metatheran Cartel building downtown. You know, the one that's burned down and abandoned now? Well, we were there because a friend of ours was caught snooping into the Cartel's records, and we thought he was being held inside. Knowing what those little pigmen are capable of, we feared the worst. No time to call in OPS; we had to save him ourselves.

"We'd already tried the subtle approach, but my Jedi friend was about as tactful as a Krayt Dragon. After bungling everything from hello to flirting with the secretary, we were thrown out on our ears before we could so much as scope the security cameras. Aside from the blast door in the back of the office, we'd come up with nothing. Plan A was a big, fat wash.

"So we were all trying to come up with Plan B. Our professional scrounger was no help, the Jedi was still blushing, and our Wookiee was as clueless as ever. He was just jamming down on the speeder's pedals, pushing back against the driver's seat, complaining about the lack of room."

"Wait," piped up the Bimm. "So the Wookiee was with you? He wasn't the one held captive?"

Meelo looked at the diminutive interruption so crossly; he fell silent instantly.

"As I was saying, the Wookiee was being less than useless, as usual. So all of the sudden, the vocoder box on the blast helmet next to me chimes in with, 'I say we smash the speeder into the front doors, leap out before everything explodes, and slip in during all the confusion!' Of course, the blast helmet belongs to Keth-Keth, the most annoying Jawa on the face of Cularin.

"So we all veto his idea immediately as being both irrational and insane, not to mention illegal on so many levels. With nothing else constructive to add, he shuts up and gives us all some peace. If that peace had lasted a little longer, maybe we could have avoided what happened next."

There was a chortle at the end of the bar from the robed figure. "Peace never lasts. Silence is only the brief pause between gunshots."

Meelo nodded again. "Exactly. So we're all thinking of how to get into the Cartel's headquarters and get our friend out when our Twi'lek scrounger says, 'We've been made! Two swoops behind us, coming up fast!' I tried to look back to see if it was a real threat or another of that tendril-head's paranoid delusions when our speeder lurches forward.

"Two things you gotta know about Roorrrwiir. One, he's the twitchiest sentient I know. He panics at the drop of a hydrospanner and is as likely to fly into a rage over a spilled glass of tea as he is in a real fight. I'd go so far as to say the lumbering carpet's neurotic, but I'd never do it in earshot."

There was a long pause, punctuated only by the soft sounds of Meelo sipping at a second round of Merdeon's wake-up fuel. Finally, the Bimm couldn't take the waiting any more. "And the second thing?"

"Oh, Roorrr can't drive. Of course, we didn't know this when he sat down at the controls, but we figured it out real quick when the speeder's engines cut on full burn and the whole vehicle slammed nose-first into the ground. Before we could bail out, and trust me I was going to, it leveled off and started zooming in a diagonal line into the nearest power conduit pole.

"The pole came crashing down, nailed one of the swoops, and sent it spinning into the other. Both drivers caught a nasty case of ground trauma before rolling to a really ugly final stop. I was gonna hop out and see if they were still

breathing, but the sparks from the severed pole fell into our speeder.

"Of course, Roorrr panicked again. No one was hurt, but the way he freaked, a skiff full of Dathomir witches could have been on our tail. He roared like a battlerager and the speeder went out of control . . ."

She paused for effect, pondering her cards. ". . . straight into the reflective glass windows of the Cartel Building. The fuel core tore open, venting flames all over the walls and billowing the thickest smoke I've ever seen. The fire-suppression systems in the building shorted out because of the downed power pole, so the emergency lights, red and brooding, kicked on and the whole place started blaring alarms. It was mass chaos.

"Barreling out of the speeder before it blew, we did the only thing we could do. We lased through the blast door, went downstairs, sliced the Cartel's mainframe, rescued our friend, and beat feet before the Cartel goons knew what hit them.

"Well, we tried to beat feet, but the way out was blocked. Not by Cartel thugs, mind you, but by an OPS speeder arriving on the scene to see what the emergency was. Now don't get me wrong -- I love OPS, and they've bailed me out more times than I'd like to count -- but we were in no shape to answer questions, and our friend needed a medic. If we'd have stopped, they would have arrested us, and rightly so. We were hosed.

"That's when Keth-Keth goes nuts. He leaps onto the hood of the OPS speeder, shrieking like a razorcat, and lobs a stun grenade inside it. The rest of my team of total idiots follows suit. The result is more ion energy in one enclosed space than I ever want to see again. I wouldn't be surprised if those poor officers ended up sterile; I really wouldn't.

"Luckily for us, the OPS officers never really got a good look at us, since they were staring at the fire when we came out. So we can make good our escape, right? Wrong. The Jawa chirps, 'We need someone to blame this on!' So he hauls a can of spray-namel out of the bag he totes around and writes in huge red letters, 'W.O.L.F.' all over the car. As we're running -- and trust me, I'm running now -- he starts shouting 'Free Kashyyyk' and 'Wookiee Liberation Front' at the top of his vocoder's digital lungs."

At that, Meelo looked down into her drink and shook her head. The Bimm, shell-shocked, spoke before she could continue. "So W.O.L.F. was just some

Jawa's excuse to go grenade happy? It isn't real?"

"Pretty much, but like everything insane that Jawa does, it kinda worked out in the end. I mean, we ended up going with his plan, but it did get our friend free. And enough people have latched on to the Wookiee Liberation Front thing that it's a real organization now. I hear they're flying in relief supplies to Kashyyyk even as we speak. Wild, huh?"

The silence that followed was broken only by the quiet voice of the hooded man at the end of the bar. "If you don't mind my asking, if everything works out in the end, why are you in here trying to lose every credit you have?"

That brought what passed for a smile to the Rodian's face, though it faded quickly. "I'm just in here hiding until our latest mess blows over." After draining her glass, Meelo continued. "You see, Keth's got this saying. 'I'm three feet tall. Anything I can hit, you can't afford to lose.' Says it all the time when things get hostile."

The cloaked figure nodded. "And?"

"So about an hour ago, we got stopped for an I.D. check at the Hedrett bridge by a couple of pain-in-the-tail clone troopers. One of them starts harassing Keth, telling him that he should get back to Tatooine before he gets deported."

Another nod. "What happened?"

"Well you see, Keth's got this stun glove . . ."

Meelo couldn't help but chuckle as every male in the bar, regardless of species, shifted uncomfortably.

Grudge Match

Not everything involving the green world of Cularin is about galactic events or epic struggles. Many of the conflicts that play out every day within the system are far smaller and meaningful only to those involved. What transpires in the city depths may not shake the heavens, but such events are no less important to the men and women fighting for survival in a universe turned against them. Indeed, many of the battles that take place on Cularin have little to do with the

darkening of the shadows in the galaxy. Most are about nothing more important than an old gambling debt or a dimly perceived insult across a noisy cantina. Not every fist raised in anger does so against the oppression of the Senate or the rabble-rousing of the Separatists. Sometimes, a raised fist is just looking for a face to punch for the pure, uncomplicated joy of punching it . . .

Try as she might, her footfalls echoed all the way down the alley. In Hedrett, the majority of the roadways were made from the recycled decking of hundreds of old starships. It was a wonderful "waste not, want not" policy, but the clanking of her armored boots on the plate steels was liable to get Caranna just that -- wasted.

For two days now, she'd been on the run. No rest, no sleep, and a blaster graze across the shoulders that kept aching were constant reminders of how dogged her pursuer had proven itself. She had to think of the person hounding her as an "it" because the few glimpses she'd seen had only been of metal armor and an insanely oversized pair of handguns.

When she saw it at all, that was. She'd been chased all over civilized Cularin, back and forth between the twin cities, and from one corner of the industrial center of Hedrett to the other. She'd run out of places to hide. All of her usual shadows were either smoldering piles of rubble or she'd worn her welcome out long before this mess started. It occurred to Caranna for a moment that perhaps, in a way, she'd brought this on herself by being every inch the stereotype of a back-stabbing Twi'lek. Fortunately for her sense of pride, such thoughts rarely stuck with her for long.

No, this was all the fault of the slime-spawn chasing her. It had interrupted a perfectly good dream about flying the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs by firebombing her apartment. It had changed the security codes on her rightfully stolen ship. It had run her ragged through street after street on this Maker-forsaken planet for days.

And now, it was going to pay.

Caranna's first impulse in any dangerous situation was to bolt like a razorcat in a hailstorm. Failing that, her next instinct was to exact dire revenge by any means necessary. The fact that it had taken more than fifty hours for her to get from one inclination to the other spoke leagues about her preference for running. Regardless, Caranna was tired and hungry, and her lekku ached.

This nerf herder was going down, one way or the other. She'd managed to get a little distance on her assailant by slipping into the sewers of the twin cities. She knew them fairly well and could usually pop up anywhere she wished, though in her mad dash she'd gotten a bit lost.

Being lost was worth what her trip into the muck had turned up. In one of the least tidy corners of the sewers, she'd come across the mostly eaten body of an old "working" associate of her. While she had to admit that Krael had looked better, the blaster rifle still strapped to his desiccating back was the best present he'd ever given her. Its power cells were missing, but that wasn't a problem. She had six stashed in the only thing she'd been able to save from her apartment -- a combat jumpsuit with roomy pockets.

Now the woman with power cells had a weapon and was armed and dangerous. Now the rules changed. She came up into the lights district of Gadrin, rifle in hand and looking to get even. The nice buildings here would all be closed to her right now; she smelled like a charnel heap and probably looked worse. That was all right; she didn't want inside. She wanted on top.

It was an easy climb to reach the nearest rooftop. She knew the roof landscape of Cularin almost as well as she knew the sewers below. OPS Speeders were almost all ground vehicles, and few officers were prepared to match her jump for jump up here. Of course, she usually had an ascension gun for those rare times when her agility failed her, but tonight she'd have to play things closer to the edge.

Standing in the middle of the roof, as equidistant to as many other buildings as

she could be, Caranna's temper finally snapped. She'd been chased, wounded and now treed like some prize lakata on a nobles' hunt. No more. No more!

"I'm here! Come get me, you chuuu'reek!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

It was possibly suicide to call the hunter's attention, but in her present state, starving and exhausted, she was about to fall over, anyway. At any rate, her pursuer probably couldn't hear the cry; she was eleven stories up, and there wasn't a soul to be seen in any direction. The shout was more a shriek of defiance than any real attempt to communicate.

Thus, when the concussive force of a heavy blaster shot slamming into the rooftop sent her sprawling, she was as surprised as she was suddenly terrified. The metal monstrosity, silver and black with ridged edges on its forearms and a pair of vibrating bayonets extending from each of its huge pistols, leveled both guns and fired again. The distance between Caranna and her attacker was enough that she rolled out of the way of the twin shots by pure instinct before they could land.

With the soft whine of servos kicking in to augment its strength, the walking specter of steel-clad doom easily made the leap onto her rooftop. She vaulted to her feet, sought cover behind a heat exchanger, and squeezed the trigger of her new rifle. There was a high-pitched warble inside the gun, and its venting blew out sideways. Then the power clips fell out. Finally, the entire front of the rifle fell off.

"Frazlat!" She threw the handle at her would-be killer out of sheer frustration. She connected, at least, though the bit of metal and formed plastic served as little more than an amusement to her attacker. As it started to move toward her, pivoting on heavily piston-wreathed legs, she tore the meter-long retaining bolt out of the exchanger and held it up like a weapon. Right now, it was the closest thing she had.

The figure lifted both guns and, with the flip of a switch on the handle of each, their barrels extended, spun backward, and reseated into the main body of the weapon. This protected the apertures of the blasters and turned them into a pair of frighteningly lethal-looking double-bladed punch daggers. Then a whirring trill updated her mental picture -- they were double-bladed vibro punch daggers.

Caranna wasn't going down without a fight. She'd been fighting all her life, and she wasn't going to have it end with begging. Two days ago, when she was well-fed, rich and happy, she'd have begged. Right now, there was nothing in her but animal anger. There was no way this Bantha chod was getting the thrill of an easy kill.

She came in swinging, diving low and lashing out with the steel rod. It collided with the hip seam of the powersuit, sending up a loud clang and spraying sparks from the impact of metal on metal. Her attacker retaliated with a backhand that missed by only a scant inch, forcing her to roll wide or get impaled.

She came back up and, for a moment, was tempted to throw the rod. Her common sense -- what was left of it, anyway -- screamed for her not to, because even if she hit, she'd be weaponless. Instead, she went on the defensive and blocked the sudden onslaught of vibrating dagger strikes. Each time, she was forced to give up a little more ground.

As she took the third of a string of ineffective blows against the figure, it occurred to her that a rooftop had a finite amount of ground to give up. The realization came a split second too late. Already swinging wide, her foot stepped backward into nothingness, and she plummeted backward off the building . . .

. . . or should have plummeted. Instead, the attacker's metal hand shot out and grabbed her by the front of her battered jumpsuit. Caught, her feet still touching the roof as she hung over the edge at a dizzying angle, Caranna could see it raise its other fist and aim its blades at her throat.

"Don't I even get to see your face, Sith-slug?"

The head tilted for a second and, with a low hiss of environment-sealing gasses escaping the cowl, its faceplate opened. Caranna's eyes widened. Staring back at her was an angry-looking bounty hunter of her recent . . . acquaintance.

"Razzie?" she said in disbelief. "Is that you?"

The man's jaw set and his eyes flared. "That's Razor, you lavender harridan, and yes, it's me. It's me after months of working for those thrice-blasted droids just to earn enough credits to leave their planet." The blades started vibrating faster and with a vicious slash, he tore his fist downward. The stroke was not at Caranna herself but instead at her steel club. Easily severed, the glowing stump of metal in her hand vibrated with the force of the impact.

"It's me after doing work I don't even want to think about in return for a new combat suit, a new ship, and all the tech I needed to track you down for some much-needed payback." He scowled, raising his fist again. "How's it taste?"

Caranna shuddered and looked into his eyes. "Truthfully?" she asked, a little dazed and a lot scared.

"Might as well start telling the truth now, since your time's almost up."

She looked at him, her eyes widening slightly. "No one's ever beaten me before. It's -- fantastic!" She ran her hand over his steel-plated forearm. "You've never looked better, Razor. Revenge really suits you."

He blinked. Then he blinked again.

Then he was seeing stars, a hand-sized piece of steel smashing into his forehead. Staggering back, he waved his blades wildly but connected with nothing. The blood in his eyes made it hard to see, but he lowered his

faceplate with a roar of anger. "Woman!"

"Come on, gorgeous! Chase me some more!" She'd vaulted off the rooftop onto another and was running away as fast as she could. He watched her go, his rage boiling over as he kicked on his boot jets and joined the hunt. He tried not to admire her, desperately tried not to think about how appealing she suddenly looked.

"When I catch you . . ." he shouted after her fleeing form. In truth, he had no idea how to finish the sentence.

The Price of Neutrality -- Isolation

It has been said that it is far easier to become free than to remain so. Nowhere in the galaxy is this more in evidence than in the Cularin system. Newly emancipated by the unexpected announcement of its former Senator Lavina Wren, the planets of Cularin must now deal with the inevitable problems of breaking away from the Republic. While freedom from martial law is certainly a benefit, the many hidden costs begin to surface quickly throughout the system.

*The saying should perhaps state, "It is far **cheaper** to become free . . ."*

He pulled his freighter into line with the many other ships waiting for a clearance window to leave orbit. Space might be huge, but that wasn't in evidence over the skies of Cularin today. Right now, space was feeling cramped.

Comm static gave way to a fellow pilot's voice blaring over his transceiver. "Okay, who else is sick of these delays?"

Borrath "Big Haul" Freelan leaned back and turned the volume down -- but not off. He'd been waiting for the griping to start since Flight Control had spoken the words "two-hour wait" a few minutes ago. Right on cue, the whining had begun.

"Two by two, shipper." The voice was one he recognized as belonging to an old business partner of his. Technically, the ship Ogly was flying belonged to him, but the collapse of the system's only real Shipyard had destroyed all the

records. Borrath considered tearing into his "old friend" on the comm about it, but that Bantha hunt could wait for another time. Besides, Ogly was small sailfish compared to the load he was moving. Until this score was done, he needed to lay low and keep quiet.

"Yeah! Who does Dal'nay think he is, setting up these checkpoints and making us wait in line for inspections before we can leave or return planetside?"

Another voice answered, one Borrath didn't know. "He probably thinks he's the Militia Commander, which, last I checked, he *is*, you nerf-brain."

The voice of Bor's long-time shipping nemesis "Hands" Malray cut in over the channel. "I don't give a frag who he thinks he is or why he's got us waiting. Militia Commander or Grand Chancellor, none of that matters. He's the one with that *Nebula-A* parked in front of us, and I don't fancy an ion bath. Do you?"

Borrath hated to admit when Hands was right, but he was so very right. He and the others weren't parked here because they agreed with the new initiatives on system safety put forth by the Militia. They were here because they didn't really have a choice. No one had been burned out of the stars yet, but more than a few ships had been comp-cooked by ion blasts and hauled dirtside for search and repair.

He knew someone was eventually going to say it, and "Twitcher" Xeelo didn't disappoint him. He spoke just enough Rodian to make out, "Martial law was better than this."

Borrath grabbed himself a cup of Go and settled into his chair. This was going to take a while.

"I hear that! The Republic didn't care what we were hauling as long as we passed a weapons scan and had up-to-date reg!"

"Oh, blow that out your airlock, nerfer! You never must have gotten boarded by a squad of clonies looking for Sep spies. They tore my ship apart looking for people who weren't there! I wouldn't even be flying if the Militia hadn't picked up the tab for piecing my transport back together."

"Spoken like a true symp! Hey, Moonrun, why don't you go to the head of the

line and point your guns at us like the rest of these Militia swine?"

Borrath tuned out for a while, thinking about his own problems. None of these people had touched on the main thing yet. Life for an independent operator had gone way downhill since . . .

". . . Nirama, and don't you forget it!"

He looked up and checked the comm ID screen. The voice was female, and the ship registered as the *Last Light*. Of all the people talking, she'd gotten his attention. At least *someone* in Cularin wasn't afraid to talk about He-who-should-not-be-named. As he expected, comm chatter died off for a bit.

Then finally, "Yeah, *Last Light*, that goes without saying."

The woman's voice answered again. "That's what's been happening, all right. Not a one of you've had the guts to talk about what's really been going wrong. When N was in charge, it meant something to fly these stars. Now, after the slug, everything's just drek, and no one's got the moons to do a thing about it."

Borrath topped off his cup and chuckled. Now *this* was entertainment. The comm got quiet again, but it didn't stay that way. In any group, there's always one person who just doesn't get it, and that person always chooses to speak at exactly the wrong time.

"But Nirama was a criminal and a pirate. Scum just as bad as Riboga, right?"

Bor cringed and glanced at the ID. Inwardly, he said goodbye to the captain of the *Twilight Star*. Whoever that twit was, he'd be dead if any one of the ships around him ever encountered him in open space.

Out of respect for the soon-to-be-deceased, Borrath turned off the open channel and sent a quick message on a coded line to the *Last Light*. It read, "Thanks for keeping the faith."

He didn't have to wait long for a reply. It came over the same code and was just as short. "Thanks for having some."

He waited a while before opening up the comm to listen to more banter. Some of the talk was valid -- prices on everything *had* gone up, flights in and out of system *were* more of a hassle, and the Militia was becoming, one might say,

overprotective. Still, calmer heads prevailed and admitted that, like it or not, the current situation was vastly preferable to a Republic cruiser sitting over Cularin and another parked above Almas. Those things just made Borrath nervous. They had since the day they first arrived.

"You want my advice?" The voice was Ogly's. "We should blow this system and look for a better place to do business."

That tore it. Low profile or not, he had to say something. Hitting transmit, he spat into his comm, "Name *one* system better than Cularin, you star-snake. Name *one*."

The silence that followed -- and the rounds of cheering afterward -- were all the answer he needed and exactly what he'd expected. For all its problems, for all its hard knocks, there was nowhere like Cularin anywhere else in the galaxy.

Nowhere.

The Price of Neutrality -- Rebellion

It is a natural instinct for any living creature to try to survive. It is a hallmark of sentience when that instinct expands to bettering one's survival past the need for food and shelter. When this drive is a healthy one, societies flourish, and the divide between cultural classes provides incentive for competition and advancement. Governments rise, economies are created, and the quality of life improves for the majority of those involved.

But when the instinct is allowed to grow out of control, everything is put at risk. When the lure of profit outweighs the cost of the actions taken in its name, only one thing can result: disaster.

Still wearing his uniform cap backward like a complete Gundark, Nill ducked back out of the window and sat down with a heavy thud. "Hoo-wah! They sure do seem upset about somethin'! Whaddaya suppose it was, Vegg?"

His partner, a tired-looking Zabrak with no patience for the lame-skull he was saddled with, said nothing. But when it looked like Nill was going to open his

mouth again, Vegg spoke in a vain attempt to shut the idiotic Human up.

"Oh, I don't know, Nilloc. Perhaps the ultimatum they just received? The manifesto delivered to Cularin by our rather acquisitive and ill-advised employers?"

Still cradling his blaster carbine like a favored son, Nill looked at him blankly.

Exasperated, Vegg paused just long enough to peer out the window and report troop activity to the gunner's post on the roof. Then, he dumbed down his words a bit. "They are upset because the people who pay us just informed Cularin of their desire to rule all commerce in the system."

Again, Nill just gave him a vacant stare. "Comm . . . erce?"

"Buying things?"

The addled soldier nodded vigorously. "Oh, yeah! I like doing that! What are you gonna do with your pay? I want to get some land east of Hedrett and start a farm."

It was Vegg's turn to stare. "You . . . want to be a nerf herder?"

Nill pulled down his helmet with a flourish and grinned. "Yep!"

With a deep, cleansing breath, Vegg let that one go. It was just too easy. "That sounds great, mate. You're amply qualified for the role, I assure you."

Nill crouched next to the window and stuck his carbine's long barrel out of it to scan for incoming forces. "Well, I don't know what *amply* means, but thanks!" Sighting something, he pulled the trigger and sent a red bolt out into the abandoned Tolea Biqua streets.

Knowing his partner's aim, Vegg felt certain the Militia soldiers outside were in absolutely no danger. Only house pets, potted plants, and trash dumpsters had any reason to fear Nill. Any reason at all.

"So whatcha gonna buy with *your* pay?"

Vegg grimaced. His counterpart was dim, but determined. Perhaps simple minds had an easier time staying in a single track; he really didn't know. In any case, experience had taught him that if he didn't answer the question, he'd be

hearing it all day. Only the potential -- and at this point almost welcomed -- possibility of the building getting stormed and them all shot offered any chance of reprieve.

"My family has had the same ship for four generations. I'm only in Cularin because her hyperdrive blew while I was passing near the system. I got towed here, and I've been stuck ever since."

Nill nodded and took another shot. Somewhere far past the battle outside, a small animal howled in surprise. "Yeah, that's all great and everything, but whatcha gonna spend your pay on?"

Vegg groaned. "A new hyperdrive, you dolt! The Coalition, the group of businesses and corporations funding this government takeover, is offering price breaks on its own goods to us, and I'll be taking advantage of it to fix my vessel and depart this miserable backwater." He tightened his grip on his blaster. "Do you not listen?"

With a shrug, Nill traded out the power cell in his rifle. "Yeah, I listen, but you don't talk so good."

Ten seconds later, Vegg commed up to the roof. "Blade One to Blade Three, copy."

"Blade One, this is Blade Three. We heard a shot, but we didn't see incoming fire. You all right down there?"

There was a short pause. "Yes, Blade Three. Blade Two just had an accident. He . . ." Vegg couldn't help himself. "He bought the farm."

There was just silence for a moment, and then the gunner on the roof responded. "Understood, Blade One. Tragic accident. Be sure to file a report if any of us make it out of this."

"Copy that. Out."

Vegg dragged the now-spare carbine over to his window and took a quick look outside. Nill hadn't been good for much, but his wild shooting had kept the Militia guessing as to where the next shot would land. Forcing them to stay behind cover had been useful until now, but that wouldn't work with only one

person laying down fire.

Before he could duck down, a shadow fell over the Militia's side of the street. Concerned that they were bringing in something big like a walker or a tank, Vegg reached for his macrobinoculars. Even as he was bringing them up to his face, he saw the shadow stretch over the street and cover the building he was in.

The Militia troopers were looking up as well. One of them was gunned down for coming out of cover, but Vegg didn't see the shooter. He was too busy aiming his macros up into the cloudy sky. A shadow that big could only be caused by something massive -- a tug maybe, or a transport trying to land . . .

It turned out to be something far worse. Vegg focused on the incoming shape, and as the image appeared in the macros' display, all the blood drained out of his face.

The Coalition had been running the entire takeover from a capital ship purchased at high cost from the shipyards of the Separatists' main industrial element, the Trade Federation. The huge, ring-shaped battleship was their command center and the focus of their operation. It was the biggest thing in the system, and with the Republic gone, its superiority over the spacelanes was uncontested.

It was also guttering fire, exploding across most of its rent hull, and plummeting through the atmosphere directly toward Tolea Biqua. Through his viewers, Vegg could make out escape pods jettisoning all over the craft, most of them getting torn apart by the violent lightning of Genarius's perpetual storm.

Flaming metal death was falling like rain onto Tolea Biqua, and there was nowhere to run. Vegg dropped his macrobinoculars and turned away from the window. The communicator kicked on as he stared off into the void.

"Blade Three to Blade One, you see what I see?"

He didn't want to, but he made himself move. With only seconds left, at least he wouldn't die in silence. "Affirmative, Blade Three."

"I guess we're *all* about to buy the farm, huh?"

Vegg sighed. "I knew that line would come back to haunt me."

What Are We, Then?

The following text was found on a datapad left in the Hedrett Groundsport several days ago. The datapad -- identified as belonging to Jedi Master Minos Fel'Kona -- subsequently had its contents uploaded to Cularin's holonet for all to see. Which, as the text makes clear, is more than a little ironic.

Some small amount of commentary has arisen around the datapad and the thoughts contained therein. The question that most people seem to be asking, though, is simply this: Where is Master Fel'Kona?

It's odd, the cycles we go through. When I was a boy, I remember so many other children carrying around personal datapads that they would scribble on whenever they felt the urge. These diaries were personal, private -- a way for the individual to try to set his thoughts in order, to deal more effectively with the world.

Now, everyone posts his thoughts to the holonet. Everyone seems to be laboring under the illusion that what he has to say should matter to everyone else. All it does is create noise, which obscures not only the person's thoughts (valid and important though they may be) but also the thoughts of every other being struggling to be heard.

Which makes it odd, I suppose, that I have taken to keeping this log of my own. It's not for anyone else, just for me, but I find myself writing as if I had an audience. It's a conceit of our culture, I suppose. We all have an imaginary audience, a clamor of voices in our minds that tell us that what we have to say is important, is worth being heard or read. I'm not so sure anything I've ever had to say was worthy of either. I'm a man. Nothing more. That I have worn Jedi robes most of my life, that I wield a lightsaber, doesn't change that my skin singes just as quickly when exposed to flame as anyone else's might, doesn't change that I sometimes wonder what is to become of us all, in the wake of recent events.

The Jedi Temple on Coruscant, burning. That's hard for me to believe. For the first time in my life, I find myself seriously considering the option of hiding. So many have died. The Council, decimated, a message sent to stay away, lest we

fall to someone called Darth Vader. Our own leadership in Cularin, gone. Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night and stare at the ceiling and wonder if it might all have been a dream. A horrible, empty dream, where hope faded like a slow-dying star.

It isn't, though. The Jedi are being hunted, declared enemies of the Republic we have served all our lives. I've never been an enemy of the Republic, though, nor has any other Jedi I've known. We may be enemies of Palpatine -- he has declared us as such, so there's not much we can do about that -- but the man is not the Republic. Cannot be, if the Republic exists in more than name. Of course, it doesn't. Palpatine has created what he calls the First Galactic Empire, which I suppose makes him the first galactic Emperor. I didn't need an empire, or an emperor. I didn't need to hear that the individuals who led the Jedi had been named traitors, accused of attempting to overthrow a legitimate government, when no legitimate government could exist under the rule of someone who would consort with the Sith.

All of which forces me to ask the question I've been leading up to: If we are not the protectors of the Republic (and Palpatine says we are not, and there is some question of whether there is even a Republic to protect any longer), and we are not enemies of the Republic (many of our number fought and died in the Clone Wars against a Separatist army bent on destroying what we swore to protect), what are we?

It's not an easy question. The two options, had you asked me a year ago, seemed mutually exclusive and virtually exhaustive. Semantically, I suppose it's possible that with our order being declared enemies of the Empire, if we were to strive to restore the Republic to its former glory, we could be both its protector and its enemy. Or protector of one, and enemy of the other, though in their form they seem close to identical. The Senate still exists. It's just not clear what power it will retain under Palpatine and his armies. The leadership defines the galaxy. With Palpatine as leader of the Empire -- or whatever he considers himself to be leading this week -- we are its enemy. We are rebels.

That does not -- cannot -- change our responsibility. The people of the galaxy need to be protected. The galaxy itself needs to be protected.

But how? There is only so much that can be done from here in Cularin, and I have to wonder whether it's wise for us to do anything at all. Aside from a few incidents on Coruscant, most of our citizens have managed to stay beneath the

notice of Palpatine and his ilk. Not completely, though. And Senator Wren -- may the Force be with her -- took her crusade for our protection to the highest levels, meaning that Palpatine cannot help but be aware of who we are and what we stand for.

To say nothing of the fact that Cularin has one of the highest concentrations of Jedi remaining in the galaxy.

Which brings us to the matter of Palpatine's pet, this Vader. I'm not sure which of the rumors about him to believe. That he's dangerous, there can be no doubt. Grievous was dangerous as well. The Jedi-killer droid, which sounds more and more like Grievous, was dangerous. Cularin has dealt with dangerous for quite some time. The fact that we've not yet received a visitation from any of Palpatine's troops tells me that he may have some other plan for us, or that such a plan may already be ongoing. That is enough to unnerve almost anyone.

It's not fear. At least, I don't think it is. I've meditated on it a great deal, when I wasn't out searching for Academy survivors, and I don't believe I'm afraid. What I am is uncertain. Uncertain and uneasy. Uncertain of the proper course of action to take. Uncertain of the proper time to take action. Uncertain whether it's better to remain in Cularin, to protect our adopted home from whatever may come, or better to leave, to draw attention away from a good and innocent people who I am certain would sooner die than accept the rule of an unjust leader. Many already have died -- too many by far. I am uneasy because this is not a decision I would have ever anticipated needing to make, because the changing nature of power on Coruscant is not something any of our order foresaw. We were blinded to the truth. Now, those of us who remain are blinded as to the right course of action.

The reports I've heard from those who were able to escape the clone armies is that one moment the battles were being waged as usual, and the next, clone commanders turned on their Jedi leaders. The clones were tools. The Jedi were tools. We were all used, in one way or another, to put Palpatine into the position he's in.

This is why I pause. The next move, which should be clear, isn't. I know there are yet Jedi in the galaxy, and I understand that Vader is hunting us down. I go back and forth -- should we go after him, or should we stay away from him? Which does Palpatine want us to do?

For all the maneuvering it took to get him where he is -- to take him from being a Senator from a small system, to Supreme Chancellor, to Emperor of the galaxy -- he must have foreseen that some Jedi would survive the initial attempt to set us up as enemies of the galaxy. (I do not now, nor will I ever, believe that the Jedi Council acted in any way contrary to the best interests of the galaxy. Which means that Palpatine did, and that he somehow managed to outmaneuver Masters Windu, Yoda, Tiin, Fisto, Kenobi and all the others who have been lost to us.) If he did this, there is little chance that he failed to account for what would come after he succeeded. He must already have plans in place to deal with an offensive against him. To say nothing of the clone army at his disposal. So it might be the ultimate foolish act to attempt to stop him or his servant, Vader.

On the other hand, he has to know that we would consider this. His planning would take into account the fact that when the Jedi Council was destroyed, the remaining Jedi would assume that resistance would be futile, and slink away to the Outer Rim. So maybe he's just counting on his existing forces to defend him and won't expect a targeted strike.

I think I could talk myself in circles for hours. The simple solution? It isn't. We need to figure out what Palpatine expects us to do, and then do the opposite. But the one thing we cannot do is remain in Cularin. The more I think about it, the more convinced I become. If there is one place he would send Vader to look for us, it's here. As soon as I can, I will take every Jedi I can find, and we will leave.

Maybe, one day in the future, we can discover what it means to be a Jedi in the Empire. Or better still, we can rediscover what it means to be a Jedi in the Republic.

Pax Empirica : The Wookiee Annihilation

The mission began with a briefing. They all begin with a briefing.

In the grand tradition of Imperial cruisers, the briefing area had gleaming white walls and floors like black mirrors. Two hundred of us clamored into our seats to watch the briefing. We wore uniforms, not armor. We would spend plenty of time in armor, later.

Captain Janzor switched on the holo display, and a giant planet appeared in the air above him. The crisp image, both solid and translucent depending on how closely you looked, rotated slowly, revealing green continents and clear blue seas that could have been on any of the more than a hundred planets I had visited. One nice thing about serving in the Imperial Navy is that you see the galaxy. Today you are in Yavin, tomorrow it is Hijarna, or the Cyax Stars. This time it was

Kashyyyk. I had never heard of the planet before.

"Grand Moff Tarkin informs me that the cruiser will drop us here. " A yellow dot appeared over one of the green continents on the planet's surface. "From here, we will march following these coordinates. " As Janzor said this, a trail of white dots flashed to illuminate the path.

"March, sir?" one of the soldiers sitting near the front of the briefing asked.

"As you can see, Kashyyyk is covered with dense jungles. War center analysis suggests that we will be safer on foot than traveling in heavy transports on our approach. Our targets live in treetop cities, and transports would be vulnerable to traps. " As Janzor finished this statement, an audible groan spread.

"Isn't that why they make AT-AT?" the officer asked.

"Useless in this foliage. You can't walk a 50, 000-kilogram AT-AT on tree branches. "

"How about fighter support?" the officer persisted. He began to sound concerned.

"TIE fighter support would seem sensible, " Janzor said in a tired voice. There was a collective sigh of relief. "Unfortunately, the jungle is too dense for fighters. TIE pilots would be so bogged down circling around trees that they would be easy targets. Reports suggest that the target area is too overgrown for scouts on speeders. "

The holo changed to show the image of a tall, two-legged creature covered by thick golden-brown fur from head to foot. It had a wide mouth and small black eyes. "Depending how big this thing is, I might give one to my little nephew for

a pet, " I whispered to Milo Strander, a soldier I'd met when I joined up three years ago.

"This is a Wookiee, " Janzor said, "the dominant species of Kashyyyk and the reason we get to visit the planet. "

Strander raised his hand.

"What is it soldier?" Captain Janzor asked.

"How big are they?" Strander called back.

"Excellent question, Corporal. " Janzor paused for a moment. "This is its actual size, " he said stepping up beside the image. It looked to be about one and one-half times his size.

"So, Dower, you hate your nephew?" Strander asked.

"Stuffed, " I said. "I meant after I had it stuffed. "

The holographic image reached a hairy arm behind its head and pulled a bowcaster over its shoulder. It held the weapon properly, cradling the heavy shaft over one arm. "The Wookiees' weapon of choice is the bowcaster. Scouting reports suggest they make good marksmen.

"They look pretty stupid, " someone yelled out.

Janzor stopped to smile.

"I've heard about Wookiees, " someone else said. "From what I hear, they can't even say their own names. "

"No, I don't suppose they can pronounce their names, " Janzor said. The holographic Wookiee shook its head with angry movements and made a loud, whiny growling noise. "This is the full extent of their speech. Doesn't sound like much, but it appears that they communicate with each other.

"They have certain primitive capabilities. They can be trained to pilot a transport or a space barge. Word around Navy Command is that some Neimoidian trader crashed on Kashyyyk while transporting a herd of banthas.

When the Trade Federation ran across his homing beacon a hundred years later, they found a new species: Wookiees. "

"He's joking, right?" I asked Strander. "He's joking isn't he?"

Strander turned and glared at me, giving me one of those "shut up, idiot" stares. Come to think of it, the mouth and the fur on the image did remind me somewhat of a bantha. I looked at Strander and said, "That's just not right. "

On the way back to our quarters, Strander and I stopped by Trooper's Canteen- a cruiser bar made especially for elite forces. Strander was the new generation of soldier- a genetic clone, not that he believed it. Part of his genetic programming made him overlook the fact that 40 percent of all stormtroopers had his exact same face, hair, and voice.

Most clones also had the same build as Strander, something that gave me great comfort. Corporal Milo Strander has a square chest, thick shoulders, and sinewy arms. If he grabbed your arm and pulled you, his fingers left distinct bruises in your flesh.

The curious thing about cloned soldiers was that while the Empire created them all alike, they invented their own personalities as soon as they came out of the tube. Some became lazy and fat, some became machines of destruction and distinguished themselves in battle. No GeNode, the street name for genetically enhanced soldiers, ever retired from service.

"Those Wookiees sound like brutes, " I said, as we walked into the bar.

"Wouldn't want to go toe-to-toe with one, " Strander agreed. "Good thing we've got blasters. "

We went to a small table at the back of the bar. Stormtrooper bars, like the service itself, are sparse, tight, and efficient. Retinal readers scan your eyes as you enter, cataloging your visits and keeping records of what you drink and how much. So do the waiter droids that tend bar during daylight hours. The human bartenders who serve drinks at night are more forgiving. For a few dozen credits, they slip you cheap Coruscant whiskey and report that you drank only beer.

Some soldiers showed up at the bar earlier than we did after the briefing.
Captain

Janzor sat with three sergeants who had recently joined our platoon. I had never spoken with the new sergeants, but I knew their kind. They would fear nothing and no one, give absolute and unquestioning obedience to superior officers, and run us foot soldiers into the ground. They came from the first generation of genetic Marines-tough, dutiful, cruel, and stupid. They felt no pain and had no regrets.

They did not mix well with Janzor. As they spoke, he stared at them intently, angrily, seemingly ready to leave his chair. He leaned forward and waved his hands in short, excited motions as he spoke; but he also used hushed tones so that no one could hear. Apparently the sergeants had a secret, one that they shared with Janzor. From the look of things, Janzor did not like what they had to say.

"Look at those GeNodes, Wayson, " Strander whispered. "I'd kill myself if I were a clone. "

"How you going to do it?" I asked.

Strander laughed. "You keep saying that. I wouldn't joke about that if I were you. "

That was another thing about clones- they were genetically programmed to believe they were real people. Strander could sit at a table with five other Stranders, all identical in every way, and never notice that he was one of them. In fact, he was also programmed to be too polite to discuss cloning to other clones of his issue. "Smart programming, " I thought. "Nothing beats it. "

"Think they know they are clones?" I asked.

"How can they not know they are clones?" Strander asked. "They look exactly alike. "

"Yeah, imagine that. " Strander did not look like the sergeants. They came from an older, long-discontinued batch, a more vicious group. They had greasy black hair and cruel faces. Strander had thick blonde hair and deep blue eyes. So did

the six soldiers sitting at the table next to us. "So what if you did have to fight one?"

"A cloned soldier? No problem, " Strander said. "They're not so tough. "

"How about a Wookiee?" I asked. The waiter droid came and we ordered beer.

"That's another story. " The droid came back with our drinks. "This isn't sport; this is war. They may be tall and strong, but blasters are a great equalizer. Wookiees are not bolt proof. " Strander dropped his voice to a nearly inaudible hiss. "Besides, I've got this. "

Strander sat with his hands resting palms down on the table. He rolled his right hand over, revealing a silver disk with fine red lines bisecting it. The circuitry etchings under the lines showed like blurs in the dim light of the bar.

"A hand bolt!" I said in amazement.

"A what?" Strander asked in a jovial voice, just in case anybody heard me. He leaned forward. "Wayson, keep your voice down. "

"That's a Vollusk hand bolt, " I repeated.

"Is it? The smuggler who sold it to me said it is was an inflatable Star Destroyer. "

"Strander! You can get two years in the brig if you're caught with those things, " I said.

"And it would certainly serve me right, " Strander took a deep breath. "Naughty, naughty me. " He looked me right in the eye and smiled, but his voice became hard. "What do you think we are, Imperial Boy Scouts? If one of those hairy beasts gets its claws around you, it'll pull your head off, helmet and all. "

"But they're not safe, " I argued. And I was right. Vollusk hand bolts were mini blasters that had a nasty reputation for overheating and blowing up after one or two shots. Smugglers used them as a last resort when captured, and that kept the technology alive. Petty criminals and gang leaders used hand bolts

because they were small and cheap. They were a big commodity with Hutts, but the Senate banned them and violators faced fines and imprisonment.

"You'd rather wrestle with a Wookiee?" Strander asked.

"Got any more of those?" I replied when I considered his alternatives.

"Thought you might feel that way. It just so happens I have a few extras, and you might even talk me into sharing with you at the right price... say, 300 credits. "

"Hey! Hand bolts sell for 100 credits on the black market. " I'd considered buying one for insurance purposes on more than one occasion. That was the interesting thing about cloned soldiers-they may look alike, but they each had unique personalities. Milo Strander had the personality of a street urchin, a genuine Jawa in a stormtrooper's uniform.

As the transport took us toward Kashyyyk, I noticed something that should have caught my eye earlier. All of the foot soldiers selected for this mission came from the same batch as Strander. I was the only exception. Our little invasion force included three scouts. They came from a different cloning issue, one with wiry builds and small bones. Speeder jockeys with muscular physiques tended to weigh down their bikes.

We sat on benches in the brightly lit transport. Though a few dedicated souls had already donned their helmets, most of us wore only our body armor and sat with our helmets on the floor by our seats. Some men inspected their blasters and organized the inventory in their belts. I sat with Strander in the back of the ship. As we whispered back and forth, my attention kept straying toward the crates of supplies for our mission. One crate of rations sat in a corner. Apparently, someone expected this mission to go very quickly. Platoons our size generally ate through a full crate of rations per day.

Janzor's three sergeants paced through the transport cabin pausing only to glare at talkative soldiers. They moved with the grace of predatory animals, taking long strides and looking side to side fiercely. "You, Dower, " one of them snapped through the speaker in his helmet.

"Sir?" I said, saluting, then standing at attention.

"Helmet on, trooper. "

"Sir, " I said. I reached down and placed the helmet over my head. The moment it fit into place, the readout appeared in the goggles, identifying the sergeant as First Sergeant Oswald Strepp. Computers in our helmets recognized soldiers by their uniforms and identified them in our goggles.

"Are you reading me clearly?" Strepp asked.

"Yes, sir!" I answered. I could hear his voice clearly through my helmet, more clearly than before I put it on. Sensors in my helmet singled out the transport's engine noise and filtered it out as an unimportant interference.

A bright red ring began glowing around my goggles. "What status have I signaled, trooper?" Strepp asked.

"Alert status, sir. " During combat, sergeants and officers signaled different alert statuses by illuminating these lights in our goggles. Red rings meant high alert. Yellow meant caution.

"That will be all, " Sergeant He spun around sharply and moved toward his next surprise inspection.

I breathed a sigh of relief as he left. Strepp and his ilk would ride you all mission long for a single mistake. A malfunctioning helmet could result in a week of guard duty. I did not even want to know what I might get for accidentally discharging my blaster. I pulled off my helmet and felt the rush of warm cabin air. "He seems friendlier than usual, " I mumbled to Strander. I glanced quickly to make sure my helmet was turned off. Sergeants and officers could monitor communications made through helmets. I'd known more than a few soldiers who said foolish things and got caught by eavesdropping officers.

"You see that food over there?" Strander asked. "There's only one crate. Nobody told me that this was a day trip. "

The way Janzor explained the mission in our briefing, we had to enter a drop zone, move north across a pre-set path destroying any communications arrays we passed, then secure a site. Missions like this took a few days, maybe a week. "I know what you mean, " I said, as I sat down. "I thought we were Wookiee herding. Looks like there is a change of plans. "

"You, Dower, " a sergeant stepped toward me.

"Sir?" I said, as I stood and saluted again.

"Helmet on, trooper. "

"Sir, " I still had my helmet under my left arm from the last inspection. When I placed it over my head, I saw that this was First Sergeant Tak Bazierre.

"Are you reading me clearly?" Bazierre asked.

"Yes, sir!"

The red rings began to glow again. "What status have I signaled, trooper?" Bazierre asked.

"Alert status, sir. "

He turned and left without a word.

"What are they, half droid?" I asked as I sat down.

I started to put my helmet on the floor, but Strander stopped me. "Better hold on to it, " he said, nodding to the right. I looked. The third sergeant headed in my direction. "You, Dower, " he said.

But just at that moment. Captain Janzor stepped into the cabin. Like most of us, he preferred the stuffy-aired freedom of the cabin to the cooled comfort of wearing his helmet. His normally calm face looked pale. His eyes darted around the cabin, inspecting each soldier for only a moment. Then the sergeants saw him. "Attention, " one of the sergeants yelled, and we all snapped to our feet.

"We are approaching Kashyyyk, " Janzor said. "I do not expect this mission to be much of a challenge. You are the Emperor's elite troops. The enemy in this campaign is under-armed and unintelligent. We will catch them by surprise and overwhelm them with our tactical superiority. Do you understand?"

"Sir, yes sir!" we yelled in perfect unison.

"I will tolerate no questioning of orders on this mission. Do you understand?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"We will be surrounded by superior numbers. You must make no mistakes in the performance of your duties. One mistake can result in the failure of our mission and the annihilation of this platoon. Do you understand me?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

The steady rumble of pistons echoed through the cabin, and the door of the transport slid open slowly. A few kilometers below us, I could see the thick plumage of trees, a solid layer of it that likely stretched well past the horizon. We slowly dropped through a clear blue sky with only a few wispy clouds. I quietly sucked in the cool air pouring in through the open door and watched a flock of birds scurrying along the blanket of trees beneath us.

Then I saw him, the first Wookiee. He clung to smaller branches and peered up at us, apparently thinking we would not see him. Before I could react, the transport's sensor array spotted the creature and fired three thick bolts from a front cannon. The first shot undoubtedly eliminated the Wookiee, and the second and third bolts left a small fire in the top of the trees.

"Ahh, " Janzor smiled. "Our first introduction to the locals. Splendid. "

We dropped until we were parallel with the spot where I'd seen the Wookiee, and our transport carefully crushed its way through layers of thin branches. I'd never seen such trees. The leaves alone must have weighed a full kilo. Thick vines ringed trunks and branches. The air rang with the sounds of unseen insects as we dropped lower into the canopy.

A fully loaded transport weighs as much as an AT-AT. I've seen small buildings crushed under the weight of a transport. The branches of these trees, however, did not give. As we sank into a break in the trees, the transport smashed into smaller branches and fumbled. I felt the quaking through my armored boots. Then we hit a limb. I inspected that branch later. It was about as thick as my arm; but it absorbed the weight of our ship, then flexed back, causing the transport to roll to its side. Most of us fell to the floor and grabbed a bench to hold on. One of the sergeants was too close to the door and fell out. I saw him grabbing at the ledge to save himself, but our gloves were designed

for protection, not grip. He clawed at the floor, and his helmet spun wildly as he disappeared through the hatch. A moment later, the transport righted itself.

"Pilot report!" Janzor yelled into his communicator.

"The trees are too thick, " a voice called back. "I cannot break through the branches. This is as low as I can get, sir. "

"Can you maintain position?" Janzor asked.

"Aye, sir. "

Janzor took a deep breath, and the resolution returned to his expression. He looked determined, maybe a little angry. "Sergeant, prepare your men. "

"Sir, " the sergeant bellowed. "You heard the captain! Load up. "

For some reason, the sergeants had it out for me on this mission.

"You, Dower. I have a job for you, " Strepp said with a big grin, as he pointed toward the skylift. Skylifts are special hoists used for especially long drops. I took my blaster and stepped onto the 10-meter grating of its floor.

"Permission to drop with the corporal, sir?" Strander called to Strepp.

"That will not be necessary, soldier, " Strepp called back. The readout in my goggles showed that he and I were about to have a private communication. "You're on point, Dower. "

"Yes, sir, " I said, sounding nervous.

"Don't worry, soldier. Our arrays show that there are no Wookiees in this area. " He paused to laugh. "No living Wookiees. There's some smoldering Wookiee tissue a few meters above us. "

"Thank you, sir, " I responded.

Three troopers loaded crates on to the base of the skylift. The base shook as hoists lifted it off the ground then lowered it through an armored hatch in the

bottom of the transport. I slowly dropped through the meter-thick floor. Even in the temperature-controlled environment of my armor, I could feel the heat of the engines as they fired just enough to keep the big ship in place. Then I saw the sensor arrays and cannons, all deployed to protect me. Actually, I was flattering myself. The cannons were meant to protect the supplies in the crates. I just went along for the ride.

Looking through the durasteel grating, I could see the forest below. The decision to send troopers instead of TIE fighters was wise. I looked up and saw the branch that had nearly capsized our transport. It looked like a twig compared to the thick-limbed outcroppings below me. The trees grew as thick as swamp grass. Their enormous branches butted up against each other and fused together, forming an intricate web that likely could have supported the weight of an

AT-AT, not that there would have been room for such a large vehicle to walk.

Then the words "First Sergeant Tak Bazierre" flashed in my goggles. I stared at a tree, but I did not see anything. Using an optical command, I enhanced the view. Bazierre lay wrapped around a branch like a towel strung over a rack. At first I thought he might have survived. Then I realized that he was lying face up, his back snapped perfectly in the middle.

And still the skylift continued to lower me. I dropped at an even pace of one meter per second, meaning that I dropped for a full 200 seconds before reaching a stable floor. I pressed a button and conveyor belts slid the crates on to the wooden ground. "Cargo secured, " I said into my communicator.

"I will send the next load of supplies, " Strepp responded.

"More troopers?" I asked.

"More crates, " the sergeant said coldly.

"We'll cover you from the transport. "

I wanted to jump on the skylift shelf as it rose. There was no possible way they could protect me from the transport; I was straight below them and too far away. Transport cannons might offer some protection at this distance on a flat open battlefield. In this forest, I would be surprised if its accurate blast radius

were 30 meters wide. It would take nearly seven minutes before the skylift returned with more crates. Unless Wookiees moved as slowly as swamp slugs, a Wookiee force could easily rush in, shoot me with their bowcasters, cut me, cook me, and hang the leftovers out to dry by the time Janzor and his men made it down here.

I turned up the audio feeds into my helmet and listened to the rustling leaves and creaking branches. Using optical commands, I ran an infrared search of the trees around me, revealing scores of rodents and insects, but not much else. Even so, I could hear my own heart pounding inside my armor. So could Strepp. "You surviving down there, Dower?"

"All clear, sir, " I said.

"Good. Just one more load of supplies and I will send down reinforcements. "

A warning light flashed in the top corner of my goggles, and they automatically switched back to infrared heat detection. Through a sheath of leaves, I saw the outline of a large biped with long arms and a huge head, skulking under the cover of branches. It could not possibly see me without optical enhancement, but it seemed to know I was here.

"Sir... "

"We've got him on our array, " Strepp said. "Unload the skylift as if you don't see him. We have the situation under control. "

The skin of my shoulders and neck tingled as I nervously moved toward the cargo and started the conveyor belts. As the crates slid forward, I looked around the grove. Through the infrared lenses, the leaves looked gray and the trees turned black. The red shape of the Wookiee cautiously brushed leaves out of its way and moved closer. I could just make out the shape in the Wookiee's hand—he carried a bowcaster. Whether by sound or feral instinct, the creature located me and seemed to know I was alone. He crouched to peer through an opening in the branches. From where he now stood, he had a clear view of me. I started to reach for the butt of my blaster. Pretending to look in a different direction, I watched as the Wookiee lifted his bowcaster.

The last crates slid off the skylift and a warning light blinked, telling me to turn off the conveyor belts. Not taking my eye off the Wookiee, I reached for the

cutoff switch. As I did, I saw the Wookiee's finger slip around the trigger of his bowcaster. He made a cursory glance in the scope. I had placed myself in the worst possible position. The Wookiee could easily shoot me long before I could draw my blaster.

With the conveyor belts switched off, the skylift's cables snapped and the shelf creaked as it lifted into the air. I tried not to look, but could not stop myself. His finger on the trigger, the Wookiee continued to aim at me through the leaves. Diving for cover would not help. Even a child could hit me from this range. The red alert ring flashed on in my helmet.

Suddenly the air rang with the sound of a laser bolt, and my readout reported the presence of ozone in the air. My infrared lenses flashed white and automatically switched to the unenhanced optical mode. When I looked back, I saw the Wookiee's legs under a pile of smoldering leaves.

"Nice shot, sir, " I said.

"We're lowering reinforcements now, " Strepp replied. "Hold your post. "

A few moments later, the skylift lowered with 10 troopers and three gravity-reversing repulsor carts. Three of the troopers loaded the crates onto the carts as the rest of us stood guard. It took nearly three hours to lower the cargo, three speeder bikes, and the rest of the platoon from the transport. The sun began to set as the skylift went up for the last time. We all stood silently and watched as the transport engines flared and our only link with the rest of the galaxy lifted out of sight.

Janzor turned and walked over to the dead Wookiee. He stood over the carcass admiring it like a man who has just dug an especially deep hole then looks back to inspect his work. He jostled the dead animal with his shoe. "Not as big as I had imagined, " he said as he turned and looked at his platoon. "You might want to switch your goggles to day-for-night view; we're not staying here for the night. "

"I think Strepp has it out for me, " I said to Strander as we watched Janzor examine the Wookiee one last time.

"What was your first clue?" Strander asked.

Captain Janzor knelt beside the carcass this time and nudged it with his blaster. Then he shoved it with his foot toward a break in the floor. With a second push, the dead Wookiee fell into the hole and slid through.

"How far up do you think we are?" I asked Strander.

"Four or five hundred meters, at the very least, " he said. "I took an infrared scan through the branches while I was unloading cargo. I did not see anything; but whatever is down there, I would not want to see it up close. "

"Animals?" I asked.

"Some nearly as big as rankors, " Strander said. "I think I know why Wookiees live in trees. "

"Strander, " Strepp's voice called out.

"Yes, sir, " Strander answered.

"You get to haul cargo, " Strepp said.

Before walking to the repulsor carts,

Strander paused to give me one final ironic glance. I imagined a confused look crossing his rugged face beneath his helmet. Now he got to pull the lousy duty for a change.

"Dower, " Strepp continued.

"Sir?" I said.

"You're on point. " I could hear a muffled chuckle coming through Strander's helmet.

The speeder scouts went first, heading north and charting a path for us. In open spaces, those scouts would have shot off at 500 kilometers per hour. Up here, they had to travel at less than 100 kilometers per hour to avoid running into vines and branches. If I had not known we were at treetop level, I would have thought we were deep in the jungle. So much bark and leaves had rotted up here that the matted branch floor had its own thin level of composted soil.

Beneath that soil, this second-floor forest offered uneven footing with hidden pitfalls. We had to watch our footing as we marched. An unlucky step could result in a broken ankle or a trapped foot.

And I had the pleasure of leading our band of soldiers, my blaster ready to fire at any moment. I tried to amuse myself by switching my goggles from day-for-night vision to infrared every few minutes. The good thing about infrared was that it would help me spot Wookiees long before they could see me. Unfortunately, the infrared vision caused the ground to look like a wavy mass of gray swirls, and I stumbled when I kept it on too long.

I also fiddled with my audio intakes, screening out the sound of my panting as I trudged forward. Transmissions between foot soldiers buzzed back and forth so quietly that I could barely hear them. Instead, I focused on sounds coming from trees around me. That first Wookiee moved so quietly and spotted me so quickly that I could not afford to wait for my sensors to alert me. The computers in my helmet, however, gave messages from superior officers precedence over my nervous scans. When Strepp contacted me, his voice blared through my helmet.

"You alert up there, Dower?" he asked.

"Sir, I could hear a knobby white spider from 40 meters, " I said.

"We're not looking for knobby spiders, " Strepp said calmly.

Just as he said this, a piercing growl rose from beneath the tree branch floor. Whatever was down there this time was huge and hot. I switched on my infrared vision and saw its shape through the floor of the trees. Even the wake of a TIE interceptor would normally not register through wood this thick.

"Stay focused, " Janzor's voice came into my helmet. "Nothing down there ever comes to this level. "

"How you doing up there?" Milo Strander's voice hummed quietly in my hearing piece.

"Bet I'm asleep before anyone else tonight, " I said, thinking about how tired I felt.

"You'd lose that bet, " Strepp interrupted. "You're pulling guard duty tonight. "

My spine went stiff and I stopped and looked back. "Is there a reason why I was sent first, set on point, then assigned guard duty?" I asked.

"Do you have a problem following orders, soldier?" Strepp asked.

"Gentlemen, let's keep transmissions to a minimum, " Captain Janzor broke in. "And Sergeant Strepp, I've been monitoring you on this mission. Ease off on the boy. "

"Yes, sir, " Strepp answered.

"By the way, Dower, you are on guard duty tonight, " Janzor said. "Listen up, " the captain continued, now in open communication with the rest of the platoon. "There is a small Wookiee outpost five kilometers north by northwest of here. Capturing this outpost is our first objective. We must block its transmissions, then storm it before it can send out a signal. Assuming we can make a clean capture, this will become our base of operations. Do you have any questions? No? Then prepare for assault. "

The speeder scouts flew ahead, stationed themselves around the outpost, then switched on equipment for blocking transmissions just as we first caught sight of the outpost. It was a round building with arching beams and supports. A few antennas stuck out of its roof. Confused that their radio communications were cut off, a Wookiee peered out the window. When he saw our approach, he let out a screaming growl and ducked behind a wall.

"So much for the element of surprise, " Strander said as he came beside me. "Just the same, I don't think he knew we were coming. "

"Okay, men, we need five soldiers to go in and flush them out, " Strepp announced. "Dower, Strander, you two circle around the outside of the building and shoot any Wookiees trying to escape to the north. "

"Yes, sir, " I said, relieved not to be one of the lucky five storming the building.

"No second chances on this one, guys, " Janzor chimed in. "If word of our invasion gets out, we'll be fighting our way to a clearing and praying that the transport and air cover come in time to save any of us. "

Sergeants Strepp and Dalia led the charge on the outpost. I watched as they knelt down behind the cover of a stump. Troopers on the east and west sides of the building fired shots at the windows, and Strepp sprinted closer to the door as the red bolts dissolved into the walls in a shower of sparks. Agile and unafraid, he darted left and right, finding cover behind the smallest thickets. As he approached the chest-high fence surrounding the outpost, two Wookiees popped up from behind a window and fired bowcasters at him. Strepp dove to the ground and rolled behind a small branch.

Ten of our best marksmen sat waiting for the Wookiees to show themselves. When one of the Wookiees looked out to locate Strepp, three soldiers fired. It looked as if all of them hit their mark. "Remember, Strepp, " I heard Janzor say in an open transmission, "no collateral damage. No detonators, no wasted fire. I want this building in one piece. "

The second Wookiee peered through the window, then dropped for cover as our sharpshooters opened fire. Five bright red bolts flashed in the window, passing through the exact spot in which the Wookiee had stood. A moment later, Strepp leapt over the fence, rolled to the side of the building, and crawled under the window. He rolled onto his knees with his back pressed hard against the wall of the outpost, then slowly rose to his feet. From there he waited for Janzor to send him the "go ahead" signal.

Other soldiers followed. Sergeant Dalia waited in the back, bravely standing in almost open ground, shooting at any Wookiee that dared to approach the window. With snipers targeting them and an endless barrage of bolts from regular troops stationed around the perimeter, the Wookiees could not put up much of a fight.

Then the blaster fire stopped, and Strepp dove through into the outpost through the window. I saw the glow of his blaster but could not tell if he had fired at anything in particular. Then three Wookiees came running out the back of the building. "Incoming, " I yelled as Strander and I fired volleys of bolts, taking out all three of the battle-stunned Wookiees as they came through the door.

"Not bad, Dower, " Strepp's voice said in my audio piece.

Up to this point in the mission, everything had gone better than planned. We landed unnoticed, disposed of any evidence of our landing, and captured our first objective nearly unopposed. Imperial forces operate in perfect order. The Empire operates in perfect order. That's why I love it.

Emperor Palpatine had barely brought order to the battling shards of the collapsed Old Republic when age-old forces of chaos arose to challenge him. The last of the Jedi, a class of charlatan fighters feigning some sort of priesthood, traveled the galaxy trying to restore their fallen theology. Small planet systems demanding autonomous rule needed to be crushed and returned to order. I even heard rumors of disgraced politicians trying to create alliances within the Senate to fight against progress. Emperor Palpatine built a huge army to bring Pax Emperica to the galaxy. He would need an even bigger one to maintain it.

The Wookiees' outpost was a sturdy but outmoded building, almost childish in design. It was perfectly circular and built around the trunk of an enormous tree. Its rooms were arranged in four concentric rings around that trunk. Someone must have helped the Wookiees rig it with an impressive array of communications technology, because we found scads of communications components. We also found the unassembled parts of a shield generator. I saw nothing that suggested that these animals were even mildly unintelligent. Perhaps the Wookiees had planned to bring power cores to this outpost as well. They would have needed them for the shield generator.

Five men in our platoon were trained battlefield engineers. While the rest of us unloaded the repulsor carts, the engineers set up power cores in the second ring of rooms. With three power cores working, we would have enough energy for shields and perimeter cannons and a full array of sensors. If all went right, our little outpost would be the most powerful fortification on Kashyyyk by morning. You had to love Imperial efficiency.

And so, as our engineers scurried to assemble power cores and get our base up and running, Janzor discussed the next phase of our invasion with Strepp and Dalia in an inner chamber of the Wookiee outpost. In the meantime, the luckier soldiers, Strander included, set up barracks in the outermost ring. I, on the other hand, had guard duty. The closest I would come to barracks on this evening was a spit of trees approximately 60 meters west of the outpost. And there I camped as the sun came up and my vision automatically changed from day-for-night to daytime vision. I sat and I watched.

But the Wookiees did not come from the west. They came from overgrown trees to the east. This gave them additional cover, and somehow they caught the trooper guarding that area unaware. He did not radio for help, nor did he have time to fire his blaster. Someone would have heard the shot. The Wookiees would certainly have registered with our sensor display, but the power cores were not yet complete.

So I sat quietly hidden in my little thicket, and the first sign I had of trouble came from Strander. "Holy Sith!" he screamed. "They've broken our perimeter. " Suddenly my helmet came alive with desperate squawking. "Your right! There're some to your right!"

"Cover your flank!"

"Behind you, soldier!"

I jumped to my feet and started toward the outpost, but as soon as it came in sight, I could see that the battle was almost over. Five troopers fled the building in my direction. The labels in my goggles showed that Strander was among them.

"Are you getting this, Wayson?" Strander called out. "Are you getting this? Do not approach camp. Repeat, do not attempt to rejoin the platoon. "

"What's going on down there?" I asked as I ducked back in some branches.

Strepp's voice broke in. "Maintain radio silence. Dower, hold your position. "

I looked back. From this distance the Wookiees and stormtroopers looked like miniature statues only a few centimeters tall. Hundreds of Wookiees flooded the grounds around the outpost. Using optical enhancement, I saw that they had bowcasters. They clearly outnumbered my platoon, and the sheer abandon with which they attacked confused the stormtroopers. The furry beasts seemed unconcerned about blaster fire, and many of them attacked with their paws instead of their weapons.

The Wookiees swarmed into the building from all sides, flushing Captain Janzor and a small band of 15 armed troopers out the eastern door. I could hear the

Captain talking over my audio. "Stay tight. You, cover the flank. Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Just as the brown sea of Wookiees seemed to close around the stormtroopers, six rapidly fired bolts made them retreat. A stormtrooper had climbed to the top of the outpost. My goggles identified the hero as First Sergeant Oswald Strepp. Huddled beside a beam just behind the ledge of the outpost, he fired several shots at the Wookiees, drew their attention, then sprinted to a new location and fired more.

"If you can hear me, Dower, " Strepp shouted frantically, "return to the drop site.

That goes for anyone who can hear me. Return to the drop site. "

By this time, the Wookiees had regrouped. The small circle of troopers no longer had any chance of escape. Surrounded and pinned down, they tried to circle back for the shelter of the outpost; but Wookiees had overrun the building and fired on them from the doors and windows. As I watched him fight, Strepp bent down and pulled something up in his hand. Using my optical enhancer, I saw he held a thermal detonator.

"Janzor, " Strepp called. "I am dropping a TD. On my count, hit the dirt, then run for open space. "

I glanced quickly at the soldiers making a desperate stand. Three of the soldiers had fallen. Janzor stood at the head of the circle, firing wildly and still hitting targets.

"Drop!" Strepp called. And at that moment, the outpost lit up in a huge fireball as long streams of fire exploded through the windows and doorways. For a moment it looked as if the outpost would remain standing. Badly shaken, but possibly still alive, Strepp lay on the roof with his left arm dangling over a beam. Then the thatching

I beneath him disintegrated in a column of smoke, and he toppled into the building. A moment later, the entire roof collapsed as the building turned into a well of flames.

As the vapor cleared from the battleground, I saw the bodies of dozens of Wookiees lying crumpled. Some rolled around wounded, others lay perfectly still. I also saw the blackened armor of blasted and charred stormtroopers. Some limbs and helmets lay scattered, and a few bodies were blown naked; but clearly some of the troopers from Janzor's last stand had made it to safety. Using the day-for-night lenses in their goggles, they might have been able to see through the smoke and fumes of the explosion. Using my goggles, however, I identified Janzor's armor among the wreckage of those who had not escaped.

"Wayson? Wayson? Are you out here? What happened?"

"Strepp and Janzor are dead, " I answered. "Strepp tried to clear the area with a thermal detonator. "

"I've never seen anything like this, " Strander gasped. "One moment we were resting, a moment later Wookiees began rushing through every door. I didn't even have time to grab my blaster. "

"Where are you?" I asked.

"I'll transmit a beacon. "

"No, don't!" I said. "They have helmets now. If any of the helmets down there are still working, you'll bring those hairy demons right to us. "

"Are you alone?" I asked.

"Two of us, " Strander answered.

"And two more, " a voice I did not recognize added. They probably were members of Janzor's group-the survivors of the captain's last stand.

"Okay, we can't afford to risk more transmissions. " Something told me that these Wookiees were not nearly as primitive as we had been told. Somehow they had located our force and overwhelmed us before we could establish a beachhead. We had hoped to use surprise as a weapon, but they turned that weapon against us. "Do what Strepp said. Head for the drop zone and signal for help. "

I hoped that I might run into Strander on the way. He could not have been more than a kilometer away to the east or the south, but in this dense forest, a kilometer could hide an entire army. In fact, on this grisly evening it had hidden an entire army of Wookiees. Now if it could just offer enough cover for us to hide.

Moving slowly through the densest thickets, I started the long trek back to the drop zone. Branches slapped at my armor as I walked. Were it not for my armor, thorns would have stripped off my skin. But my armor kept me safe and cool. And if I could just stay hidden until evening, the day-for-night vision in my helmet would help me see when the Wookiees could not. I turned up the volume of my audio piece and filtered out the crack of the branches hitting my armor. Instead, I focused on birds screeching and insects buzzing and footfalls-the clattering footfalls of stormtroopers and the padded steps of Wookiees.

It took me more than an hour to travel that first kilometer that my platoon had naively charged across on the way to the outpost. Now I fought my way through sticks and branches, pushing for every step. My armor cooled the air around me, but nothing could stop the burning in my leg muscles. My thighs had deep knots and my calves felt twisted. I hated this planet. Even as I paused to rest and watched an orange-and-blue bird light on a branch, I cursed this damned planet.

Then I heard Wookiees. At first I thought about climbing up a tree and hiding in the branches. Then I realized that if they discovered me, they could corner me. I would have no escape. So, even though I would not be able to see them, I hid from the Wookiees by burrowing deep into a stand of trees. I lay among rotted, insect-infested logs and covered myself with bark and dirt. And as I lay there, I switched to infrared vision and saw the red shapes of legs moving swiftly. They had tracked something, probably not me. At least they did not stop and look in my direction. Instead they rushed on a few meters ahead. Six Wookiees-I counted their torsos as they streaked by; but I could not angle my head for a better view.

I lay still for a few moments listening to their soft footsteps. From what I could hear, they seemed to have gathered around something. They started growling angrily, and I suspected that they had found their target. Fortunately it wasn't me. Then I heard screaming so loud that I had to turn off my audio piece. Even with my audio off, I still heard the screaming through the walls of my helmet.

The pack of Wookiees had found two stormtroopers hidden up in a tree. Apparently abandoning all trappings of civilization, the Wookiees poked at the soldiers with sticks instead of shooting them down. The cornered stormtroopers cowered helplessly, clinging to the tree limbs with all of their strength. I heard their screams and rose from my hiding place. Kneeling behind a knotted branch, I quietly aimed at one of the Wookiees. But as I prepared to fire, another group of Wookiees joined the first. Now there were at least 20 of them, angry, hulking, completely wild. As they knocked the first trooper from his perch, I lay back under my blanket of bark and closed my eyes. A few minutes later, the screaming was replaced by the even scarier sound of total silence.

There was nothing left to do but switch on my audio piece and listen for the chance to continue my escape. I lay alone, covered in bark, armed yet helpless. The damp bark blocked my sight. I tried all of my lenses, but all I could see was darkness. So I continued to lie still and hide, listening for clues. I heard nothing, nothing at all.

At one point, as I lay waiting for some unknown signal to leave my hiding place, I felt the ground beneath me shake as if some force were trying to pry it open. Though it seemed a long shot, I switched my goggles to infrared vision and saw the most frightening thing yet. Unless I had lost my mind, which seemed likely, I saw the image of a frozen spider-shaped creature perched directly below me. A solid floor of meter-thick branches separated us, but the monster's heat signal registered through it-or should I say, its cold signal. The giant spider was so devoid of heat that its body signature registered blue. It was so cold that my infrared spotted it through otherwise impenetrable branches. I became completely fixated watching it scratch at the wood below me. It appeared to be the size of a TIE fighter.

Then something woke me from my trance. One moment I was staring at the hypnotic blue creature, the next I nearly fainted with fright when something wrenched the bark cover away from my hiding place. I rolled over, but my infrared vision was on and I could see no details in the daylight. I aimed my blaster blindly; but before I could fire, something knocked it out of my hand. "Wayson, it's me, " Strander's voice barely penetrated my helmet.

Up to the moment that I heard Strander's voice, every muscle in my body tensed and my lungs constricted my breathing. I heard him, and my fingers relaxed from my palms. "Milo, " I said, not knowing what to say next.

"I saw you lying there and thought they had gotten to you, too, " Strander said as he helped me to my feet. A few meters behind him, I saw another trooper standing by the tree where the Wookiees had trapped their victims.

I could barely hear anything. I tried switching my audio off and on several times, but it had malfunctioned. Giving up, I looked at Strander and asked, "How bad?"

Strander sighed. "I've never seen anything like this, " he said.

Had I known what I would see, I would not have gone to look. The sun had started to set, casting an eerie red light on the spot where the bodies lay in heaps. The Wookiees had used branches to smash through the stormtroopers' armor. They had crushed their helmets and shattered their chest plates, and everything in them. Perhaps their outrage over our invasion had caused them to revert to an even more primitive state.

"I wanted to help them, " I said quietly. "There was nothing I could do... too many of them. So I hid. "

"Wayson, we are all running away now. " Strander said. "Nobody blames you. " I had to struggle to hear his words.

We hid near the bodies for another few minutes as the sun set behind the trees. Strander told me how he had found me. Apparently his identifier showed my name over the thicket even though I was hidden from view. Thinking he might find my crushed helmet, Strander switched to infrared and saw the outline of my body under the bark. When I did not move, he suspected the Wookiees had buried me. But he did not want to leave a friend behind and decided to take a closer look.

And in its cruel way, fate gave us faint aid. Strander and his companion, Private Sterns Yennich, had not grabbed weapons before fleeing the outpost. That alone may have saved their lives. They had been the only unarmed members in a group of five stormtroopers that fled the outpost. The Wookiees had picked off their three armed companions.

As we waited for nightfall, Yennich noticed something dangling from the limbs above our heads. Strander helped him climb the tree, and they found blasters.

With no other option, we did the ghoulish deed and claimed weapons left by fallen comrades. Then, under the cover of night, we continued toward the drop zone.

Wookiees clearly had sharper senses than we did, but our helmets magnified our vision and let us see at night. Something had damaged my audio technology and I heard only sounds that were loud enough to penetrate my helmet. Strander had to shout for me to hear him, but I was lucky to be alive.

After seeing the way they smashed the stormtroopers, armor and all, I felt relatively confident that the Wookiees did not plan to use our technology against us. Using our day-for-night vision, we could press on easily. Even if they heard or smelled us, assuming the Wookiees still pursued us, they would only have a vague idea of how to find us. We had to press that advantage. We had to run as fast as possible. Come daylight, the Wookiees would again be faster and smarter than us. According to my readout, we had less than eight kilometers to reach the drop zone.

Glowing red and blue insects traced curling paths through the air ahead of us. I brushed past them, ignoring their brilliant light. I could not ignore the screeching animals below us, however. Those behemoths seemed at war with one another, and when I switched to infrared, I noticed that huge beast of a spider dangling upside down from the branches just below our feet. I did not have time to think about giant monsters. My legs and lungs burned, and we had only another hour to make it to the drop zone before daylight. And then what? What would happen once we arrived at the drop zone? How would the pilot of the transport know we were there?

It became harder to ignore the spider as I realized that it was following us. I switched to infrared and looked down again. What I saw sent a chill down my spine. The dark outline of that spider still clung to the branches below us. It moved gracefully along the bottoms of the branches, stopping when we stopped, moving when we moved, and constantly prodding the wood between us with its legs in search of weak spots. Our blasters would have little effect on such a beast.

But the spider lived in a world of perpetual darkness under two thick canopies of foliage. I suspected it was blind or at least sensitive to light. All of the monsters at the base of the trees would either be blind or ultra-sensitive to light. That was the only way animals could survive in a perpetually dark world.

Lucky for the Wookiees, too. If that creature could tolerate light, nothing would stop it from burrowing through the branch barrier and making a new home on this level. Soon the first rays of sunlight would show over the tops of the trees. I was not sure whether I would feel safe from the spider or more fearful of the Wookiees.

As Strander and I pushed our way through thick overgrowth, Yennich ran toward a clearing with no branches or outcrops. I tried to signal to him, but my audio did not work. When he stepped into the clearing, a silver-blue leg slashed through the logs beneath him. I was instantly paralyzed with fear.

Seeing the danger, Yennich tried to leap to safety, but he landed deeper in that same clearing. A second razor-like leg carved through a crack, tripping Yennich and gashing his leg. He howled with pain at its icy touch and fell to the ground but had the presence of mind to immediately spring back to his feet. The spider broke through his armor and blood ran down his calf. Yennich's badly cut leg could not support him, and the wounded trooper could not possibly fight off the spider.

Two mandibles sliced through the ground and clamped around his waist. I could hear the muffled screams through my helmet as Yennich struggled to aim his blaster at the beast. For a moment it looked as if he might shoot his way to safety, then the spider's fangs pierced through his armor just below his chest. Instantly paralyzed or destroyed, the private curled into a lifeless ball and offered no resistance as the spider pulled him down through the trees.

Watching this, I began hyperventilating. "Too much!" I said, and my voice echoed in my helmet. I fought back nausea, as I turned from the clearing and forced myself to take another step. Strander stared at me. He wanted to talk, but I could not hear him. Before I could stop myself, I pulled my helmet from my head and stood staring into the helmet's black eyes. With its audio piece damaged, the helmet rendered me deaf.

Warm, fresh air filled my lungs as my head exploded with a hundred new sensations. The smell of rotting foliage and the wet heat in the air seemed to slow my brain. Then I did something I never imagined a stormtrooper could do: I tossed my helmet away. In the mounting sunlight, the infrared and day-for-night lenses offered me no protection, and the lack of hearing practically sentenced me to death.

"What are you doing?" Strander asked.

"I couldn't hear anything, " I said, taking a deep breath and trying to compose myself. I had trouble breathing in the thick forest air. "I tracked that thing all night, " I nodded toward the clearing. "It followed us for hours. "

"The sun's coming up, " Strander said. "We need to get to the drop zone. "

"And what are we going to do there?" I asked. "Shout for a transport?"

"We've got to do something, " Strander said as he pulled off his helmet. "We can't just sit here and wait for the Wookiees. "

I took a deep breath of warm air, felt actual sunlight on my skin, and looked around at the maze of green vegetation that surrounded us. Trees as tall as towers formed solid walls that outlined the sky. Under other circumstances, I would have paid money to visit such a world. One day, under the guiding hand of Pax Emperica, others would come and safely tour these woods. The Empire would win, it was an unstoppable force.

"Soldier... Soldier? Do you read me?" A voice came from Strander's helmet.

He and I looked at each other, then he picked the helmet up and fitted it back over his head. I could hear his voice as he spoke, but the soft tones sounded mumbled. Then I saw them-the three scouts on speeder bikes who had accompanied our invasion.

"We've been looking for you all night, " one said as he floated to a stop beside me.

Ambushing my platoon gave the Wookiees only the tiniest of victories.

Janzor and the sergeants went into battle with a secret. They knew that a second invasion force landed on Kashyyyk a few hours after us, a much larger force with Arakyd XR-85 tank droids, TIE crawlers, and AT-ST scouts.

The Empire had launched a full invasion and had already captured most of a continent by the time Strander, Yennich, and I made our final dash to freedom. In the end, it turned out that Central Command sent my platoon to distract the Wookiees and lead them away from the real invasion. If we survived, we had

orders to return to the drop zone and join the larger army. We'd done our job splendidly; the Empire gave us medals and promoted Strander and me to first sergeant, a position I never hoped to reach. Posthumous "medals and honor throughout the Empire" were awarded to the others.

Because we were the last survivors of a heroic effort, Strander and I were sent back to the cruiser. We would see no more action in this campaign. It occurred to me that maybe I had seen too much action. Maybe I was ready for a quiet life on some unknown planet in a distant corner of the galaxy—some quiet and orderly place. But then I realized that order came through the guiding hand of the Empire. I could never retire—my destiny remained inseparably connected with the fate of the Empire.

Pax Emperica, how I loved it!

The Spark Before The Flame

The hull echoed with the dull whump-whump of blaster fire impacting from below. The COMPNOR agents and CompForce troopers weren't giving up easy, and even though the Blackjack's structure could take it, Jax didn't like the idea of having to explain the scorch marks at his next port of call. He banked hard to throw off their aim and then pointed the ship for a vector that would quickly take them all out of the atmosphere. Trillia whistled nervously from the co-pilot's seat as she called up the nav-comp board.

"Any idea where I should program for, Jax?"

"Don't ask me. Seems our 'client' should be the one telling you that." He nodded back towards the passenger section, where a rather motley bunch had gathered and were warily eyeing each other.

Through a set of circumstances that Jax was sure he would never completely figure out, he had managed to take on three local police officers (one of whom seemed to be a Jedi, or at least someone with delusions and a lightsaber), a semi-famous galactic reporter and his kid, a droid, a rogue Naval cadet, and a fully armed and armored bounty hunter. Oh, of course, there was also "Mouse" Temple, his 'client.'

Trillia called back to the passenger hold. "How about it, Mouse? Where are we going?"

The small, nervous con artist made his way to the cockpit door and looked meekly at Jax before responding in a small voice. "Oh, heh heh. Um, well, as to that . . ."

Jax was quickly losing what little patience he had. "Out with it, Mouse! I have to burn my way out of a Republic supply port with blaster-happy soldiers and Security Bureau agents ready to kill me, I have a hold full of people who might do it

for them and take each other out to boot, and not even the advance you promised me to show for it! What the hell is going on?"

"No need to be so . . . abrupt, Jax. We've been friends too long for that now, haven't we?"

"I am not your friend! I have never been your friend, and if you don't tell me what's going on right now, you're going to wish you'd never even—"

Trillia's shout interrupted the freighter captain's threat.

"Jax, we have got real troubles. Two corvettes are on intercept vectors towards our position!"

Jax grabbed the small man and slammed him harshly against the bulkhead. "What's going ON!?! Who is this mysterious passenger we never picked up that's gotten me and my ship placed on the Most Wanted list?"

Mouse struggled to regain his composure and failed. He trembled violently as sweat poured down his forehead and cheeks. "M-M-Mon Mothma! Senator Mon Mothma! She's wanted for treason by Emperor Palpatine, and I was supposed to help her get to the Outer Rim."

Jax dropped Mouse on the deck and shook his head. "Emperor? I knew Palpatine was elected President, but Emperor? What are you—"

At that point, the Blackjack lurched wildly as capital-class blasters opened up from behind. The corvettes had caught up and were asking no questions before they fired. Jax leapt into the pilot's chair and began evasive maneuvers.

"Snake's Den, Tril. We're going to Snake's Den. After that, I don't know. But I'm from Chandrila, and if Mon Mothma is in trouble, then Jax Keyn will get her out of it . . ."

In His Image

It is natural for him to want to destroy me. It is not crude mundane ambition, as it would be in an ordinary man; it is part of his growth. And of course it does not offend me-it is why I chose him. But he needs to grow still further.

-Emperor Palpatine, on his apprentice, Darth Vader

Imperial Palace, Coruscant

The trooper was a stranger.

Vader had now served long enough beside the remnant of what had been the Republic's Grand Army to know exactly how tall a cloned soldier would stand in relation to him. The crowns of their white helmets were consistently level with the mouthpiece of his mask, every single one of them, always, without variance.

But this one barely reached his jaw.

"Take off your helmet," said Vader.

"Sir!" the trooper responded automatically and popped the seal. He eased off the helmet, an equally unfamiliar thing with its new design of flared mouth guard, and tucked it under one arm in a practiced motion.

He was far from the reassuringly standard Fett clone. The wide pupils of his pale blue eyes were the only indication of his anxiety at being scrutinized as the potential template for a new batch of dutiful warriors.

Vader estimated that he was ten centimeters too short and ten kilos too light.

He circled the soldier a few times with slow, heavy paces that echoed around the polished gray-green walls. At first Vader had been forced by his prosthetic limbs and armor to take such deliberate strides; he was now comfortably one with the suit, but he retained the gait.

It made people wary. It announced him. It served his purpose.

He paused in front of the trooper, chest plate almost close enough to touch him, and looked down into his eyes again until they began to water and the man finally blinked. Vader didn't even have to test him with the Force. He only needed to stand too close. It fascinated him.

He won't hold his ground. He's loyal and he's competent, but he has his limits. And there's too much at stake to be rushed into making an inferior choice.

"Dismissed," said Vader.

The almost-adequate trooper brought his helmet around to his chest in a choreographed move with one hand, and placed it back on his head two-handed with equal precision. Then he saluted, pivoted 180 on his heel, and marched out. Vader watched him disappear through the great double doors, and waited for the man he knew was watching from behind to show himself.

"He comes highly recommended, but I trust your judgment," said Emperor Palpatine, stepping out of the shadow of the archway. "I sense your disappointment."

"No, with respect, you don't, my Master," said Vader. They walked now, side by side, Vader shortening his stride to match Palpatine's. "I'm not disappointed. Merely refining my search. A good man, but not good enough."

"We have time. There are already clones in production. You know this."

"Forgive me, but I prefer to oversee a project from inception. The Empire might appear settled, but we need the ability to project power in these early years. And that means maintaining quality as well as restoring numbers."

"We have sufficient of both to allow you some leeway." Vader slowed still further and looked down at Palpatine, almost a caricature of old age whom he neither hated nor feared nor loved. The absence of passion was almost a state of bliss in itself. "I thought you trusted my judgment. Perhaps it's me you don't trust, Master."

"I trust you to do what I know you will do."

Vader was still wary when they teetered on the brink of what appeared to be a mutual test. He chose not to react.

"Peaceful order rests on a strong, well-equipped, satisfied army. I've just defined loyalty for you. The ideology doesn't concern them."

"Then you must look further." Palpatine pulled back his hood a little. "And I'm interested that you care about their contentment."

"I care that none of them are malcontents, and that isn't the same thing," said Vader. It wasn't entirely true: he had more time for the lower ranks than he did for the Moffs and some of the other officers. "And it's more efficient to inspire respect than to rule by terror."

Palpatine paused at the doors as if he had been exhausted by the walk across the chamber. His voice was almost a whisper. "I don't think I understood you correctly. You sound as if you wish to be . . . liked."

Vader heard the subtext. Are you weakening so soon? He was purged of anger now, but what would have been an insult between ordinary men still had to be addressed. "Harsh enforcement takes effort. I prefer to avoid the need in the first place. That doesn't mean that I won't do whatever is necessary. You know me by now."

Palpatine paused, a single heartbeat. "A pity we can't yet clone from other clones."

"We have a galaxy of potential templates, Master."

"Then widen your search." The Emperor managed a pleasant and rare smile. "Let us arrange a trip."

Vader gave him a deferential nod—a gesture, nothing more—and strode down the hall. A dozen or so stormtroopers were standing at intervals down its length, and they snapped from at ease to attention at precisely the same moment. They saluted.

All of them were exactly the same height, the same build.

There were, Vader was almost happy to note, some things you could still count on.

One day I'll have only myself to rely upon.

He was comfortable with that idea. A year ago, a few months ago, it would have made him unbearably sad.

For once he returned the stormtroopers' salute. They were almost as dependent on their armor and confined by it as he was. He felt a brief moment of purely professional kinship. Vader had passed beyond the rule of his emotions.

And he knew what it was to be shaped in someone else's image.

* * *

There had been many Emperor's Hands-under less Imperial titles and even no titles at all-during Palpatine's time in office, and none of them seemed content with that necessity. It was the nature of assassins, Palpatine decided. They were not team players.

He let the doors close behind him and settled into a carved apocia chair against one wall of his throne room. His current Hand, Sa Cuis, was waiting for him, jaw muscles twitching ever so slightly, clearly impatient even if he thought he was presenting his Emperor with a facade of calm. Palpatine wondered why the assassin bothered to disguise his feelings in front of someone with Force mastery; but it was habit, he imagined, and he allowed him his ingrained need for deception.

Cuis had a totally benign face and a drab charcoal tunic that made him look like a harmless but well-built accountant. It was another elegant camouflage. Palpatine respected a man so secure in his own strength that he needed no external displays of menace.

"My lord, I don't fully understand this mission, and you know that I need to if I'm to complete it."

It wasn't an unreasonable question, even for a Dark Jedi. "There's nothing complex in it. Follow Lord Vader to the Parmel sector and, with colleagues of your choosing, kill him."

"There are so many questions I must..."

"Kill him. He needs this."

"He's your apprentice. You invested so much in him." Cuis had very dark eyes, almost perfectly black, and for a moment Palpatine wondered if he had more than human blood in him. He had stopped blinking and now focused slightly to one side of the Emperor. An idea had apparently occurred to him; he seemed relieved.

"You mean give him a test, my lord? A run for his credits, sharpen him up..."

"No, I mean kill him. I mean no quarter. Not a feint. A genuine assassination."

Yes, Cuis had gotten the idea. Palpatine needed none of his Force skills to see that. The assassin was now swallowing frequently. "What if I don't succeed?"

"I doubt you will succeed. And he'll kill you-probably." Not a pause, not a flicker. A good man, Cuis. "A team would..."

"You will need a team, trust me. Lord Vader is not as strong as I had hoped he might be at this stage, but he remains a formidable opponent."

Cuis took out a lightsaber and held the hilt in both hands. "I know. I have acquired a more suitable weapon."

With one snap he separated the hilt into two sections; energy streamed straight and vivid from each, one blade red, the other white. He swept slow, careful arcs with both weapons, shafts almost touching, and then shut them down and pressed the hilts back into one again. "This might be enough."

Palpatine probed discreetly at the Dark Jedi's mood. Yes, worried, but determined. Professional pride and a little healthy, welcome fear. Death was an occupational hazard for his kind. "I hope not."

"But what if Lord Vader finds that you're behind this?" asked Cuis, concern for his own chances of survival apparently set aside.

"He will," said Palpatine. Oh yes, he would, and that was what Vader needed. "I hope he does."

A Sith could pass beyond hatred and anger too quickly.

Vader needed to become stronger, and fast. Betrayal would not surprise his apprentice, but there was a world of therapeutic difference between waiting for it and experiencing it. If Palpatine had still been able to experience regret, it would have pained him at that moment.

Parmel Sector, the Outer Rim

Vohai sprawled beneath the Lambda-class shuttle, a quilt of grim industrial sites interspersed with parkland and incongruously attractive residential towers. From the view port, Vader watched a single gleaming carriage zip along the unirail that hung two kilometers above the planet's surface, rejected sunlight forming a burning pinpoint.

"We'll dock very soon, Lord Vader," said his aide-de-camp, clearly interpreting his head movements as impatience. "My apologies for the delay."

Delay? Vader hadn't noticed. He was simply testing his focus again. It was interesting how much he could intimidate without even intending to now. This, he learned, was the value of sheer presence: the art of illusion. And to think he had once resented this grim black suit and longed for his whole body again.

"I expect our clonemaster at Arkanian Micro not to be late, though, Lekauf."

The officer twitched. He made as if to put his hand to his chest—a self-comforting gesture—and appeared to think better of it. "He's waiting, my lord. He's at the facility, ready to run the demonstration."

So easy: Vader was comfortable with himself now. Entirely comfortable.

The ship docked in a cool, cavernous hangar that smelled as if oiled machinery had recently passed through it. A small group of technicians and managers—he noted their variations in clothing—moved forward to greet their customer.

Vader's sensor-enhanced olfactory system detected mineral components, the rasping metallic sharpness of swarf from milled parts, even Quara and human sweat: the mundane events of the last hour here replayed themselves for him. Equipment had arrived, probably, and had been moved by maintenance staff.

And there was something beyond the immediate physical impressions of the facility. Vader could feel anxiety, the tension just before conflict.

Someone else was waiting for him. Several people.

He scanned the length of the blue durasteel ribs that formed the structure of the hangar's walls and roof, looking for a door, a gantry, any access point for the threat. It was above him. Someone was coming for him.

Two doors were set into the upper walls with just a ladder beneath. Access hatches. Corridors behind.

They're moving around up there. Five, six . . . seven of them.

The barely perceptible ripples in the Force also let Vader taste something else at a very great distance: his Master. It's inevitable. You knew he would do this, didn't you? Vader reached carefully into his black robe and slid his gloved hand down the hilt of his lightsaber. He tightened his grip. He had no sense anymore that the mechanical hand was any less his own than the flesh-and-blood one had been. The lightsaber felt a continuation of his own arm again, natural and complete.

"Lekauf," he said quietly to his aide. "Lekauf, withdraw. Now."

"What's wrong, my lord?" Lekauf was looking up at the stark walls, too, following Vader's lead. He reached for his blaster and held it two-handed, eyes darting. "I can't see..."

The managers and technicians stood rooted, shoulders slightly hunched and looking around frantically to spot what they imagined Vader could see. They ducked. They couldn't have seen anything. They were reacting to him.

"Lord Vader..."

"Get clear. I can deal with this."

Vader felt he would need Lekauf one day, but not now. He thumbed the hilt and a shaft of brilliant red energy seared the air, sending the facility technicians suddenly scattering for nonexistent cover. The staccato thud-thud-

thud of boots running on durasteel flooring echoed suddenly above and to both sides of the hangar and Vader spun around, lightsaber raised in both hands.

He faced the hangar doors.

Rappelling ropes paid out with a loud slap and the opening was instantly blocked from outside by a line of four hooded men with Thunderbolt repeating blasters. Vader felt the Force ripple with the presence of three more about to enter through the doors at his back.

Lekauf stepped in front of him to block their shots, blaster raised. Vader struck him aside with one armored blow, sending him to the floor and to safety as the stream of bolts flew at his chest plate in a concentrated V of blue light. Then he whirled his lightsaber in a neat circle at arm's length, two-handed, blocking the shots in one economical blur of energy.

The assassins paused for a frantic reload.

"Lord Vader..." said Lekauf, but he was pinned flat by the Force, arms flailing.

"Stay down," snapped Vader. I'll need you one day. The other three hit men were still at his back, hidden behind the door. He could sense it. He backed toward it, beckoning one-handed to the four strung in a ragged line now across the entrance, taunting them, buying time. They tracked their blasters and tried to settle on a clear shot that would beat the slowly sweeping lightsaber. They didn't seem able to find one.

"Come to me." They're behind me. I feel them. Oh, a little right, a little more to the right . . . "I'm not in the mood to chase today."

They knew where their comrades were, he was sure of it. And so did he.

It was just a matter of timing to bring this to a quick end.

"Now!" yelled one man.

Vader dropped and spun as the doors behind him snapped open. From his crouched position he saw legs run at him and he swung left, right, left again, slicing through bone and tendon and screams. He carried the arc through to

bring the ruby blade up as he turned and rose simultaneously to face the four other assailants now right upon him. It felt like minutes even though he knew it was two seconds, no more.

A Thunderbolt repeater was not a close-quarters weapon.

But a lightsaber was.

One man dropped instantly without his intervention. Vader lunged forward and sliced through two more, left-right. The fourth lost his arm and blaster in the same slicing movement and dropped to his knees, utterly silent, mouth open wide in frozen agony as he stared at the seared stump. Vader brought the lightsaber down across his neck. The hangar was silent now except for the sound of his own breath. He looked down at the back of the one man he hadn't killed. The black tunic was still smoking a little.

"Fine shot, Lekauf," said Vader. He released his Force pressure. "I told you to stay down."

Lekauf got to his knees and holstered his blaster. "I never rose, my lord. I can fire from a prone position, though, and you made no mention of that."

Lekauf stood up and went to him as if to check him for injury. It suddenly struck Vader that he was solid and a good height. And he was loyal enough to step in the line of fire, and then-defy him to cover his back.

Good man. At least one possible template, then.

Vader took one step back in case Lekauf actually intended to minister to him, then looked to see where the facility staff had gone. They were huddled by the bodies near the door, silent in the way of people who were afraid they might say the wrong thing at the wrong time. More staff were edging in cautiously through both doors in the ringing silence that followed the blasterfire.

"Who's your most senior executive?" Vader asked.

"Tef Shabiak," said one of the technicians hoarsely.

Vader turned to Lekauf and tilted his head slightly. When your eyes weren't visible, a gesture was necessary.

Lekauf understood perfectly. "What would you like me to do with him, Lord Vader?"

"Remove his head, please," said Vader. "This is very poor customer service. And now I'll see his deputy."

Sometimes people gasped, and sometimes they didn't. The range of reaction to horror was fascinating. Compliance was proving to be a common reaction. Lekauf walked briskly at Vader's side but a fraction behind him as they followed a visibly agitated manager through the corridors into the heart of the cloning complex.

"If you think the company was involved in this attempt, I should..."

Vader cut him short. "I know who's behind this, and it certainly isn't the company."

Lekauf's next question hung in his silence. There was only the creak of his boots as he kept pace with his Sith Lord.

Vader answered anyway. "I need to encourage better security, or we invite an open season from now on."

"Understood, my lord," said Lekauf, sounding and feeling genuinely satisfied to Vader.

But more than encouraging security, executing the top executive was another eloquent statement of intent that took little effort but spoke loudly across the Empire: there would be consequences for any act that didn't meet with Vader's approval.

Power was as much a matter of presentation as using the dark side, Vader had learned.

In his throne room, Palpatine paused while flicking through the screens of his datapad. The Force sighed slightly: he felt it. Vader had reacted.

He had survived whatever Cuis had thrown at him. Palpatine thought he actually felt his apprentice's sense of betrayal. He concentrated harder,

searching for some hint of anger or hatred, but there was nothing, and he wondered if Vader had not yet discovered the obvious.

Palpatine drew on his reserves of patience and settled back into the chair, adjusting the cushion behind his back.

He let the datapad absorb his attention again.

Vader had to take the next step. If he didn't, Palpatine's long search for another worthy apprentice would be a very long one indeed.

* * *

Vader stared at the tanks full of liquid.

As he passed down the rows, the tanks acted like lenses, distorting the figure of the suddenly promoted chief executive of Arkanian Microtechnologies standing behind them.

"I take it you favor Arkanian cloning technology, then," said Vader.

"As good as the Kaminoans', sir." He was nervous; he would have been stupid if he hadn't been. "And a full year's lead time to adult, as well—we don't rush the process. We guarantee a stable product."

"Are you prepared to attempt recloning our existing Fett template?"

"If you want us to, yes. It's not a genotype we've worked with before, so there might be uncertainties. And there's a higher failure rate with secondary cloning, but we would certainly put all our expertise into it."

"I would appreciate it if you'd try. They've proved excellent troops, especially in terms of discipline." Vader ran the fingertip of his glove down the permaglass of one vat and stared at the adult soldier forming within it.

The Kaminoans decanted their clones as juveniles and matured them naturally: he wondered what made more difference in the long run, the quality of the template or the training. He didn't care for shortcuts, not with an entire division's efficiency hanging on a single selection. But he wasn't a scientist, and

this was one area where he would have to rely on his uniquely motivational leadership to get the job done.

As he concentrated on the form floating in the liquid, trailing a web of fine tubes, Vader saw himself for a moment: burned, barely alive, mutilated, rescued, rebuilt. He wondered whether beyond the external appearance of a Sith droid there might be more that was shaping him in another's image. And he could still feel two things in the Force above all others: Palpatine's saber at his back, and the less distinctive shape of a threat that was physically much, much nearer.

"So we spread the risk," he said, and shook his equally divided attention away from both vat and threat for a moment. "Reclone a Fett template, and continue with this batch. And we'll ask Lieutenant Lekauf if he'd be so kind as to provide a tissue sample of his own for you to work upon."

Lekauf, standing with one hand on his unclipped holster, inclined his head deferentially. "Thank you, Lord Vader. It's an honor indeed." His pride and pleasure were tangible. And at Vader's side, he stood almost exactly as tall as a Fett clone. He would do.

"Would you care for some hospitality, Lord Vader?" said the new and nervous head of Arkanian Micro. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, his face fell and his gaze fixed for a few awkward moments on Vader's mouth grille. Then he looked from mouth to eyepiece, clearly thinking that his promotion would be exceptionally short-lived.

People were so transparent.

"I regret that I have other business to attend to," said Vader. A moment of graciousness contrasted exquisitely with summary execution, light and dark, combining to achieve a balanced outcome. Arkanian Micro would never present the Empire with any production problems now.

"I'm looking for someone." Lekauf took a step forward as if to accompany him, but Vader held up a gloved finger.

"You have a sample to contribute, Lieutenant. I can handle this on my own."

He could. He didn't even need a map of the city: he would find the man he was looking for because the man was also looking for him.

The last assassin stalking him had a distinctive effect on the Force. Vader tested, probing carefully, letting the impression wash through him.

It was a Dark Jedi. It was what he should have expected of his Master. This one would at least test him. And in his heart of hearts, Vader felt that he wanted to pass the test for his own sake, not Palpatine's.

* * *

Your hatred will make you strong.

Vader slipped along the passageway that connected Arkanian Micro's management suite to the large courtyard at the center of the facility. It was a square of perfectly manicured lawn fringed with identical trees whose crowns were clipped into precise cube shapes. A fountain formed of a single spout of water bubbling over a pyramid of smooth stones provided soothing ambient sound.

The last thing Vader wanted was to be soothed. He sought his hatred again. Palpatine had sent men to kill him. However inevitable that was, however much the malice was intricately bound up with and inseparable from his Master's wish to see him succeed, he had to focus on the motivating strength of pure loathing.

He paused and activated his lightsaber, listening. He sensed the Dark Jedi coming long before he heard him.

Vader felt a presence slipping through doors and drawing closer. A sensation of melting ice shivered down what remained of his back, and he seized it: a little precious sliver of fear to be picked up and used. No-caution. His armor was not indestructible, and he was facing a Jedi this time.

And he was still less than he had been when he was wholly flesh and blood.

Vader stepped out onto the lawn, clear of the trees, and waited like bait.

He didn't have to wait long. He knew the man was there, watching him, for nearly a minute before he moved from a doorway out into the sunlight. Suddenly, to Vader's right, another door opened and two women came out chatting with flimsi cups in their hands. They both looked at Vader, and then at his lightsaber, and rushed back inside, slamming the door after them.

That second was enough. The Dark Jedi took his lightsaber hilt in both hands and jerked his arms apart, releasing two beams, a red one in his left hand and a white one in the other. Vader had a brief thought that it was a marvelous piece of theatrics until the man came at him whirling the sabers slowly like a juggler preparing to perform with clubs. And the white blade whisked so close to his helmet that he had his own lightsaber raised and blocking it before he even had time to think.

"Cuis, Lord Vader," said the man. "Nothing personal, believe me."

Vader matched him step for step in the standoff as they circled each other. Nothing personal. Perhaps Cuis thought that an ice-cold act would intimidate him. But it was anger and all the other brutal emotions that would win the fight.

Vader lunged.

My Master wants me dead.

He brought his saber down hard in a straight arc and Cuis blocked it with both of his, rasping them straight down its length as if sharpening a metal blade. Vader withdrew and sliced upward, then feinted to the left, wrong-footing the Jedi, who leapt back against the trunk of one of the trees. Vader made a double lunge on his right leg, dipping under the swirling twin beams.

He needed to force Cuis into a confined space to deny him the advantage of two lightsabers. There had once been a boy called Anakin who could have done that with sheer technique, but he was forgotten, and the transformed man that was Vader opted for sheer power and began a fast, furious slashing assault, slicing through a tree trunk as Cuis dodged behind it.

My Master forced me to live and now he wants me dead. The trunk creaked and toppled and Cuis deflected the weight of branches with the Force. It bought Vader a second. He used it to send Cuis's white beam spinning into the

fountain, clattering down the wet stones. As Cuis's remaining lightsaber flew from his left to his right hand, Vader intercepted it, jerking it high into the air and using the Force to throw it to the other side of the courtyard, out of reach.

Cuis leapt high and saved his legs from a savage low sweep, but his opponent had him backed up almost into the angle of the walls. Vader couldn't match Cuis's agility, so instead he reached out with his left hand: the Force seized Cuis's throat.

It gave Vader a familiar and painful jolt of recognition. He shut out what he knew was a memory. Instead he concentrated on using a wholly unexpected surge of rage and hatred to flood the gap it left and overwhelm it. Cuis staggered back against the wall, struggling against Vader's remote, crushing grip with his own Force power. Then he sank to his knees, shaking with the effort. Vader forced him lower, and lower.

He could have killed him in that instant.

He relaxed his grip enough to let Cuis suck in a rattling gasp of air and held him there, suddenly aware of faces that appeared at a window and then bobbed down again-harmless, shocked, terrified women's faces. Office workers. Hatred worked for him now, telling him he needed not to think about-not recall-the look on their faces.

"Go on," said Cuis. He was barely audible. "Finish it."

"Who sent you?" I know. But I want to hear. "Tell me."

"Kill me."

"Join me." Vader squeezed, still a meter away. "And you can live."

Cuis stared back at him with unnaturally black eyes, panting, contemptuous. He had no fear, none at all.

"That's not how I work. I have my code."

"Name him."

Cuis simply looked back at him.

Vader throttled him to the point of unconsciousness and loosened his grip again. "Last chance."

"No."

"Name him, and join me."

There was no answer this time. Cuis simply stared. He wouldn't be broken. Vader clamped and relaxed, clamped and relaxed, taking Cuis to the point of death each time, but he got nowhere.

Good man.

He let go completely and Cuis pitched forward, taking huge gulps of air with the sucking wheeze of a dying old man.

A door opposite him flew open. "Lord Vader!" Lekauf came running out, blaster drawn, but Vader held up his hand and stopped him a little more insistently than perhaps he should have. Lekauf bounced back with a grunt as if he'd run into a wall, which in effect he had. But Vader didn't want Cuis dead right then. He was still savoring rage, seeing how it had swept through him and given him the power to defeat a faster Jedi and keep the memories locked deep within. He shut down his energy blade with a flick of his thumb.

Lekauf picked himself up. "There might still be others, sir."

"There aren't," said Vader, and he stepped forward and held his arm out to Cuis. The assassin didn't take it. Vader could have raised him with the Force alone, but he didn't. He took hold of his tunic and lifted him to his feet, holding him steady.

"You'll never betray the man who sent you after me, will you?"

Cuis never took his eyes off Vader's mask. But it wasn't horror on his face. It was simply disdain. It was a novelty for Vader, who had grown used to the awe his appearance alone inspired in everyone else.

"Get one of those technicians," he said.

* * *

Palpatine sat up, distracted from his datapad, by a faint tingling ripple that filled the back of his mouth and spread into his chest. The Force shifted imperceptibly in a far corner and settled again, but it was different this time. Something had changed forever.

Vader had changed.

"How reassuring," said the Emperor to himself.

Boots clattered on the polished floor.

"Sir, did you call, sir?" said the stormtrooper. "I heard..."

"Nothing to worry about," said the Emperor, laying the datapad on the inlaid table, screen-down. "There's nothing further to worry about at all."

* * *

Arkanian Micro was a very obliging contractor. Vader sat and watched carefully as medical technicians took buccal swabs from Cuis's mouth and passed cell-collecting devices over the skin of his arms. They were harvesting the building blocks of an army. For all the curious things Vader had seen in his life, this seemed the most extraordinary, that so much could be made from so little.

"Is that it?" said Cuis. His voice had recovered a little from the repeated choking, but he still didn't show any fear, or even that pathetic sense of hope that he might have escaped retribution. He did appear to be simply asking a question, not embarking on a plea for mercy.

In his enhanced peripheral vision, Vader noted that the technicians were now watching Cuis with more interest than they were watching him.

There were gestures and lessons and symbols that you could employ without even needing to harness the Force. Vader knew he had to choose one, or lose ground and reputation. He needed to stamp his authority on the situation and let word of mouth do the rest.

It was still a pity.

"I said, Is that it." Cuis was insistent. "Answer me."

"I'm afraid it is," said Vader, and took out his lightsaber. The red beam activated at the lightest of touches. "But you'll become an entire army. How many men can say that?"

He stood up and swept the saber as he had swept it so many times before in such a short life. Cuis's head hit the floor. The sound of the impact was surprisingly loud: heads were heavy parts of the human body. A technician slumped against the wall, hand pressed to his mouth. The salutary lesson would be spread by horrified gossip: Darth Vader would be obeyed, or the consequences would be unimaginable.

Sa Cuis had served everyone's purpose but his own, whatever that had been. He was timely propaganda, an excellent clone template, and the tool by which Vader had grown. It was fitting that the essence of Cuis would survive in a unique way and serve the Empire.

It was the least Vader owed a professional man, an honorable man who wouldn't betray his Master.

* * *

"But why a hired killer?"

Lekauf had relaxed a little in the seat facing Vader in the shuttle. He was curious, Vader knew, not arguing. He wanted to learn from him. That meant he would watch the man carefully, despite the self-sacrificing loyalty he had shown earlier.

"He's absolutely loyal to his ideals," said Vader. "His clones won't have his memories, but I'm confident they'll have the same courage and loyalty, and their ideals will simply be the ones I provide for them. Loyalty to the Emperor." He wondered when he might retire to the privacy of his cabin to take some nutrients. "And his Force powers will be exceptionally valuable in the field."

Lekauf gave the faintest impression of a man teetering on the brink of asking a dangerous but obvious question. He was an officer who had been around

Palpatine's inner military circle long enough to know-probably-who Cuis was. Vader could almost hear his thoughts.

Was it the Emperor who sent him?

It wasn't a good idea to ask that or answer it. But if rumor ever spread, he would have to deal with any suggestion that Vader didn't have the Emperor's confidence. Ordinary men couldn't be expected to fully understand the relationship between a Sith Master and his apprentice.

They would mistake the attempt on Vader's life for vengeance or rivalry, not a necessary hard lesson.

They were like regular Jedi in that respect. A Dark Jedi would understand far better. It was a shame about Cuis, but he was a more powerful tool now he was dead than he ever was in his lifetime.

Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose. A Jedi philosophy: a good one, too, if providing only half of the picture, as their sanctimonious way always did. Vader realized he had feared losing Palpatine's . . . approval. He no longer feared that. He'd let himself taste anger again-a reminder of its flavor was enough to refocus him-and then he was reassured that the Sith way was the reality of the Force. Anger was a necessary path. It could even motivate ordinary men to great things. It had its function, a reaction placed in living beings for the purpose of survival.

Vader examined the detail in the handle of his lightsaber, almost not seeing it. Jedi had-yet again-helped him learn more about the Sith path: it would have sickened them. But it was yet another elegant lesson, if he needed one, that the dark and the light side were inseparable, necessary to each other.

He defocused a little, surprised that he could still do such a thing with his artificially assisted eyes. The detail in the lightsaber's hilt appeared to shift, turning convex surfaces into concave ones, creating a new image. It was all a matter of how you looked at it. The hilt had not changed at all. And that was it: that was the fundamental weakness of Jedi.

Vader thought of the optical illusion that so amused him as a child. It was the simple silhouette of a white urn that then became the black profiles of two

identical people staring at each other, then snapped back to the urn again as his mental focus changed.

Some youngsters could see only the urn; others, only the faces. Vader could always see both, at will.

Ah, he could remember without pain now. He could recall moments from his past. But could no longer feel who he had been, and something within him said that was a mercy to be welcomed.

The Jedi would never-could never-let themselves see the whole picture. Still they couldn't see that the Force was an indivisible amalgam of dark and light.

But there were now very few left alive to learn that lesson, even if they could.

And soon, he would ensure that there were none.

* * *

Emperor Palpatine was waiting at the palace landing strip to welcome Vader back.

Lekauf ran down the shuttle ramp to stand like an honor guard at its foot, but Vader dismissed him with a nod. The lieutenant seemed grateful to be sent away. It was probably that he wasn't comfortable now being so close to Palpatine.

"A successful trip, I know," said the Emperor.

Vader almost enjoyed his dual layer of speech now, with its apparent meaning covering the subtext like a layer of snow, something soft and deceptive concealing hazards that might trip him if he trod carelessly.

"Yes, I think we've made progress," said Vader, meaning the clone templates, but also something else.

"I admire your ability to see both the strategic view and the operational detail. It's a rare combination."

"Will you require more staff, Master?" You lost your Hand. You'll be proud when you see what he becomes.

"You appear to be getting busier."

Palpatine smiled. "I have many staff."

I know. There'll be others. "I've learned a great deal on this trip."

"Cloning is a complex and fascinating science, is it not?"

"Indeed it is."

Vader paused for a moment to let Palpatine pass into the palace vestibule in front of him, standing back between white-armored stormtroopers who were at that moment the only beings around him whom he knew for certain wouldn't make an attempt on his life.

The thought no longer bothered him. The power of the dark side was his reassurance.

"We should talk about the templates later when I've assembled the Moffs," said Palpatine.

"I'll await your call, my Master."

"I know what you will do."

But I'll do it sooner than you might expect. The thought was unbidden, and it was neither an unspoken threat nor the seed of a counterplot. It was simply a fleeting Force-vision of the future, Palpatine's death far short of the millennium he planned to reign.

"I'll rebuild your army," said Vader.

"Exactly, and you'll do it well," said the Emperor.

Vader waited for Palpatine to disappear from sight before walking to his adapted meditation chamber to feed himself and maintain and clean his suit.

He was no longer a Jedi-or even a man-but the first Jedi rule still rang true somewhere inside him.

Survive.